スレイカーズすまっしゅ。

1 獅子の試練を乗り越えて

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SLAYERS SMASH! VOLUME 1
Trial Of the Lions Den
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Translator Foreword:

This series has been around over 30 years and has over 30 volumes; no one has successfully translated it; It is abandoned and likely will never get a proper translation.
I have the means to translate it so I can read it, so that's what I did.
Here is the fixed up translation edited to near perfection as I read through it.
The entire series should be done soon, I just need to read through it and edit the document first. That's the main limitation here. It will be released on archive.org for archival purposes.

FAQ:
Q: *insert any comment about my translation*

A: Fuck you it's free, I owe you nothing. Actually I owe you less than nothing. I'm giving my time and services free here. Your precious comfort series isn't sacred. Anyone can make a translation any way they please. You can go suck a dill brand if you don't like it. No one is forcing you to read it. Some of us just want to know what's in there. I am not Penguin publishing. I do not owe perfection to you. I have translated these so I can read them and am uploading the nicely fixed up results so you can benefit.

Q: Did you use AI
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Q: I noticed Grammar or spelling errors.

A: Either fix it up yourself and send me the fixed copy or cope and go back to beating off furiously to your waifu statues you filthy basement dweller.

All my translations are free to derive from. Make your own edits if you want to fix up formatting and Grammar. Use them to help your own translations, I will officiate any fixes submitted into new editions.

[Overcoming the Lion’s Trial Part 1]

The sound came from the left. "Uwaaaaaaaa!" Breaking through the vegetation, a young man leapt out from the thicket on the left side of the highway and rushed across. Right behind him, five or six goblins came running in pursuit. Goblins were basically humanoid pests with low intelligence—well, regardless. "Mega Brand!" Boom! The single attack spell I fired easily blew away the passing goblins.

"You saved me. I'm grateful." The young man, who had been chased by the goblins, said as he bowed deeply. He seemed to be around twenty years old. He had short black hair and was quite handsome. I didn't know why he was being chased by goblins, but I also hated getting dragged into complicated situations. For now, what mattered was whether he would show his gratitude with cash... but judging by the man's dingy traveling clothes, I probably shouldn't have expected much.

"Oh, don't worry about it." As I waved my hand dismissively, the man glanced toward the goblins I just blew away. "Even so, that attack spell was just in time. To chant a spell against goblins that appeared out so suddenly, you must be quite something." "It was nothing special. When I sensed something, I thought it might be bandits, so I prepared a spell just in case. It turned out to be goblins, but I fired it anyway—that's all," I explained, and the man fell silent for a moment.

".....Ah... I see... I see, I see... so that's... I see..." He mumbled to himself as if evaluating something as he stared intensely at me, then he straightened his posture. "You look like someone quite used to combat; if you don't mind, would you listen to my story?"

Here it comes. "The story... is it...?" I murmured in a clearly unenthusiastic voice, the man spoke up hurriedly. "No, I was wondering if I could ask you to be my guard for the journey. Of course, I'll pay you properly. I think I can manage ten gold coins for a journey of about five or six days... would that be alright?" It wasn't a bad amount, but it was a bit low for me, Lina Inverse: a warrior and a genius sorceress. ".....Well, the fee depends on the situation, you know?" I said as I started walking. I intended to turn him down with that, but the man followed along. "Certainly—then first, let me explain the circumstances." He began to tell his story of his own accord.

"In my hometown of Filai, there's a slightly strange custom. When a marriage is decided, the man must go to a valley about two or three days from here, pick an Arania flower, and bring it back to decorate the bride's hair. It's a way to overcome a trial and show the man's strength—it's an old-fashioned custom, though." At his explanation, I involuntarily stopped and snapped at him. "Wait a minute! If it's a trial like that, it's meaningless unless you do it with your own strength! Why are you trying to borrow someone else's power!?" Facing my question, the man wore a bitter smile.

"Ah. It seems I've caused a misunderstanding. Actually, during this ritual, people from the same town are supposed to get in the way. The goblins being set on me earlier was also part of that." "What!? Even that!?" I found myself raising my voice. I didn't know who was controlling the goblins or how, but one mistake and he'd die.

The man kept his easygoing smile. "Whether they understand that or not... the point is that it's not just about fighting strength. It's about being recognized for your wisdom, your bonds with people, and your financial resources. Otherwise, a man who isn't confident in his physical strength would never be able to get married his whole life, right? It's fine to be alone when leaving town, but it's considered okay to join up with someone or hire a guard along the way."

"......Huh—....." Extreme rituals and customs often softened their rules over time, becoming something strange—I had read that in some book before... so this was that pattern." I see. So that's the situation. That's why you want to hire me as a guard." "Exactly. I've heard the rumors. If you're that Lina Inverse, I'll make the reward twenty coins. Five in advance." "You've got a deal." The man shook my right hand as I held it out. "Nice to meet you. I should have mentioned it sooner, but I'm Leonard Kingsley. Call me Leo." And so, I ended up taking on this guard duty.

The sunset colors started to shift into indigo. By the time the night grew closer, Leo and I had arrived at a town along the highway to look for a suitable inn. In the eastern sky, dyed in deep blue, an early full moon had begun to rise.

Suddenly, "Lavi!" Leo raised a startled voice and stopped in his tracks. Ahead of us, in the twilight, stood a single woman with a gentle smile. She looked to be around twenty. Her clothes weren't exactly expensive but were in good taste and well-maintained. Her pale golden hair was illuminated by the remnants of the sunset.

"You're here." "La....." I grabbed the back of Leo's collar as he tried to rush forward and held him back. "What are you doing, Lina-san?" He asked sullenly, I replied without taking my eyes off the woman. "Who's that?" "—Ah. She's Lavi Luxor. My

fiancée. If I can just bring back the Arania flower safely, that is." "......Hmm....." Leo turned toward Lavi. "Lavi, this is Lina-san. She's the one who's going to be my guard." "I see. Take care of Leo, won't you?" She nodded while remaining serious. "I'm glad you came, Lavi. But putting yourself in danger—" While he said that with a smile, Leo tried to step forward, but I held him back yet again. "What's wrong, Lina-san?" he asked sullenly again, I spoke in an exasperated tone. "......Leo, can you see what she's holding?" "It's just a club, right?" came the immediate answer.

That's right. In the hands of the woman smiling in the twilight was a club so rugged it looked like it could kill an ox in one hit. To put it bluntly, she looked scary. I looked her straight in the eyes. "So, Lavi-san, I want to ask. Are you on his side? Or are you—on the side giving the trial?" A small laugh flowed on the wind. "I'm so glad. The guard Leo found is excellent." "—What do you mean!?" Leo raised his voice, finally sensing something was wrong. "It's simple!" Lavi leaped back a great distance, putting space between us.

"Trials make a person grow! And the more difficult the trial, the more a person can grow!" She held out her hand—the one not holding the club—toward Leo. "I love you, Leo. That's why I want you to overcome the greatest trial and become the greatest man.That's why I've decided to stand in your way myself as a trial. You know the saying. A lioness pushes her cubs into a bottomless ravine and only accepts as her own those who crawl back up." "What!? My lady is the King of Beasts!?" My retort was, of course, ignored. "If that's what you want!" Leo clenched his fists and shouted toward her.

"I'll become a man strong enough to protect you! I'll overcome any trial! I'm glad. I knew you'd say that." Lavi raised her right hand and snapped her fingers. Suddenly, from the shadows of the street trees, the buildings, and the roofs, several shadows appeared one after another! Their bodies were wrapped in cloaks, and hoods were pulled low so their faces were completely hidden in the darkness. There were seven shadows in total!

"Wh-who are these people.....!" To Leo, who raised a cry of astonishment, Lavi continued with her smile unchanged. "That's right! To give you an even greater trial, I've called upon the Seven Strongest Wives of Filai, whom I've asked for assistance!" "If you want to undergo the Arania flower ritual, we'll act on behalf of the one giving the trial, bringing the ultimate trial imaginable to break and crush men as we have one hundred and five times before already!" "......Uwaaa....." I find myself groaning at her explanation.

"So in short, you're saying you're just a bunch of bored, nasty-tempered noblewomen...?" While I was feeling exasperated, one of the shadows spoke up. "To forge weak men into lions, there is no other way but to accomplish it through trials like those of purgatory!" Another shadow continued the words. "We, the Strongest Seven Wives of Filai, have been chosen to become the Wives of Lavi Luxor. To turn the man, Leonard Kingslayer, into a true lion, we shall participate in the Arania Ceremony! This is also for him to become a worthy husband! We will see that you overcome our trials!" The wives turned their invisible faces toward me all at once.

"And there stands Leonard's chosen power and his sword. Let's see, little girl, whether you can handle the trials we cut out for you. If you are lacking, you may rely on someone else." "Of course, even if you just gather numbers, that doesn't mean you can break through our trials, but at least do your best with all your might." "Hahahahahahahahahahahah!" Seven laughs rang out, layered together! It was like dogs barking nearby!

"Don't make me laugh!" I was provoked, but Leo clenched his fists and said, "I...! I want to be flirting with Lavi from morning until night after we get married! For that... I'll overcome any obstacle, no matter what it is!"

Faced with such a completely pathetic declaration of intent, Lavi blushed, and one of the wives with an invisible face remarked, "Hou... that's a rare, admirable ambition for a man these days." Eh!? Was that a positive evaluation!? "And don’t forget that!"

Leo pointed toward me. "Don't underestimate her as just a girl! Her full name is Lina Inverse! There must be some of you who have heard the rumors!" At his declaration, the seven people whose faces could not be seen began to stir. "Lina Inverse... I've certainly heard that name before." "The wandering sorcerer who goes by the nickname 'Bandit Killer'... no way... could this girl be...?" "Calm down. She might just be using the name Lina Inverse." "But what if she's the real thing... The rumors say she's more dangerous than raw oysters left out at room temperature for five days."

"Ah. I left the pot on." "My mother-in-law asked me to go shopping." "Oh no, oh no! I have to go pick up the kids!" Three of the shadows vanished with a poof. ..... Uh, what. How could it be that three of them just dropped out? "Did you see that!" For some reason, Leo raised a cry of victory. "The wives are weak to rumors! The power of just Miss Lina's name alone did them in!"

"Ugh.....!" One of the shadows groaned a small groan. "I'll acknowledge your strength..... Lina Inverse! But don't get carried away! Those three just now were the weakest among us Strongest Seven Wives!" Well, they were certainly small-frys. But for three out of seven to be small-frys means they're more like a disorganized mob than a serious threat."

"Don't think the many trials we are about to set will be easily defeated!" In response to the wife who spoke so haughtily, I casually raised one hand. "Um. A question." "Hou. What is it?" "In retaliating against the trials, it's fine if someone accidentally dies, right?" The four remaining shadows twitched and then froze. They slowly looked at each other's faces.

"M... Mrs. Mude... that girl just said someone would die...?" "D... Don't call me by name! It's... it's fine. It's surely a threat. Yes, it's just a threat." Of course, it was just a threat. However, sometimes a threat like this could be immensely effective. This was especially true for amateurs who were not used to fighting.

They might have had plenty of experience setting things up under the guise of "trials," but when it came to the possibility of being counterattacked and suffering a painful experience, their movements became hesitant. If I did this right, I could disband the remaining four with just this threat!

".....If it's going to turn out like this, I should have called out to Mrs. Josephine too....."
"But surely that household is busy with the children right now....." I felt like I'd heard that unpleasant name somewhere before[1]... It was surely just a coincidence! I told myself firmly, and while I kept my expression unchanged, Lavi stood up straight in front of the hooded wives. "Stop laughing!"

"What's your response!?" "If the trials are a struggle, those who give them must also be given a struggle! I cannot have him face a succession of the Strongest Seven Wives who have this level of cowardice!" ".....Well..... Then we will do exactly as you say!"

One of the wives spoke over Lavi. "We will fear nothing! But be warned, it's recommended to overcome them gently without killing or wounding us, as it gains you higher points!" To those who were becoming timid, I said nonchalantly, "Of course, depending on how you do things, I might not be able to hold back either."

[1] Slayers Excellent OVA

"....." The wives fell silent again. Good. The threat was effective enough. But only Lavi was motivated. "I Understood that from the start!" "This time is just a greeting! Consider it a trial until you bring home the Arania flower, and spend the coming days accordingly!"

Saying that, they leaped back even further and disappeared into the shadows of the houses. At that moment. The figures of the wives who should have been nearby also vanished to who-knows-where.

"They've finally appeared.....! The Strongest Seven Wives of Filai! But! I will absolutely not give up!" Beside Leo, who was shouting toward the empty night sky, I thought to myself—this job might be pretty easy— The time I called out "stop" was around noon the following day. Following my instruction, Leo stopped his feet.

It was just an ordinary road found anywhere. One side was an open field, and the other side was a thick forest. In those dense trees, there were several presences competing for attention. The feeling was familiar to me; it wasn't something like bloodlust or hostility. Rather, it was a presence like children playing hide-and-seek, mixed with curiosity or mischief. It was too common a presence, and I almost missed it by mixing it up with the atmosphere of the town yesterday, but in this situation, it was clearly obvious.

"Why don't you come out? I know you're hiding." At my call, there was a slight commotion. Whispering voices were exchanged— "As expected. To sense our presence here." While saying that, the first one to emerge from the thicket was Lavi. Four hooded figures in the same cloaks as yesterday appeared followed Lavi. ...So, It’s as I thought, three of them really did drop out.

Four Housewives walked toward us. "Heh. How is it? Have you started to miss the town of Filai after the trials we gave you?" they asked. Leo and I looked at each other. After taking a room at the inn the day before, we met up in the dining hall that morning after waking up. We ate breakfast and set off.

That was how we arrived at the current moment. Our rooms at the inn had been separate, but I hadn't heard anything about something happening. "Did something happen? Leo?" I asked. "No... not really," he replied. As they exchanged words, the Ladies shared a knowing smirk.

"To think you didn't notice a single thing. You're truly hopeless." "Think back, Leo. About the inn you stayed at last night. Weren't the towels damp? Wasn't the floorboard covered in an excessive amount of wax, making it incredibly slippery? Didn't the blankets feel itchy?" At their questions, Leo thought for a moment.

"—Wait! All of that was a trial you guys set up...!?" "Exactly!" "Whaaaaaaaaaaaat!?" Even being told it was a trial, Leo for some reason slumped to his knees in disappointment, looking completely defeated by the confident Ladies. "Dammit! It was so clever that I didn't even realize it was a trial!"

"......Um....." I hesitantly raised my hand. "That... doesn't really count as a trial, does it?" The four Ladies fell silent for an instant at my remark. Then, one after another, they spoke up. "Your understanding is naive, Lina Inverse!" "It is entirely possible for trials in life to appear under the banner of 'daily life'!"

"There are many cases where things that seem like mere petty unpleasantness are actually the first step of a major trial!" "If you do too much and get counterattacked, it’s scary, so I just ended up making the setups smaller and smaller," and so on, they desperately made their excuses. Ah. As I thought, my threat had been effective. Still, I knew that letting my guard down was forbidden.

What they were doing was petty, but looking at the essence of it, I realized they had gone around Leo's room making various small adjustments without me noticing. This time it was just a level of harassment, but it would have been trouble if they had set up something truly malicious. Therefore, I couldn't afford to show any weakness here! I put on a fed-up expression.

"......Um, in short... you're saying I should turn back before even greater trials befall me—is that it?" "Exactly!" the four Ladies shouted in unison. However, "That is... out of the question!" Leo stood up with all his might and raised his voice. "Before the noble goal of getting married and flirting all the time! A trial of this level isn't even a trial at all!" "U..... gh.....!" At his declaration, the Ladies were somehow pressured into silence.

"That's it... that's my Leo." Lavi murmured dreamily. .....Well, I didn't think he'd give up on marriage just because of slippery floors or damp towels, but I felt like Lavi’s standing was disappearing. "In that case!" "If you're going to go that far!" "We must respond with our true power and give him an even greater trial!" "Behold! Our true forms!" Four voices flowed in succession, and four cloaks and hoods fluttered into the sky of the highway!

The figures that appeared from beneath them were—four incredibly ordinary Ladies! They wore plain clothes with slightly faded long skirts and aprons that looked a bit aged! .....Well, I thought, "!" no matter how many you line up, 'Ordinary' is just 'Ordinary'! .....No, well... since they called themselves "Ladies" from the start, it wasn't like they were going to have some outrageous appearance... but I had expected something with a bit more impact or at least some distinguishing features..... I stared blankly at the Ladies.

"What's that?" "No. Even if you ask 'What's that'..." a large-framed blonde Lady said. "That's why. If you're wondering why we were hiding our forms with cloaks and hoods—it was because it was cold!" The four of them answered my question in unison. It was an incredibly ordinary reason! Perhaps I was the one in the wrong for expecting something?

"Now, we will show no mercy!" As she spoke, one of the Ladies—a middle-aged woman with black hair and a slightly plump build—blew a finger whistle! At that moment, from deep within the trees, several voices of non-humans approached! This voice—Goblins!? Did she have the power to manipulate Goblins!? If so, was the one who sent them to attack Leo when we first met also her doing!?

I hurriedly began to chant a spell! The thicket to the side shook and parted, and what jumped out was indeed a Goblin! I didn't hesitate— "Fireball!"
"Boom!" When the sphere of light I fired shattered, it scattered an explosion and crimson flames!

The fire might set the forest ablaze, and there were concerns about that... but I'd just put it out properly later! For now, I prioritized the flashy visual, sound, and intimidation effect!

The Goblins were easily blown away, and before the roar even faded, smoke covered the area. But what was this countless something flying through the smoke!? I jumped back instantly, but my cloak was pulled and I tripped! Looking down, a black line was stretching out, catching the edge of my cloak! It was too thick to be called a string, but a bit thin to be called a rope; it was a small lasso. In this smoke, did they target me accurately!? Or was it just a lucky hit from a poor shot!? Whatever it was, I wasn't afraid of just one being tangled.

I pulled out the short sword at my waist and cut the tangled rope—at that very moment! A shadow tore through the smoke and ran! The target wasn't me, but Leo! Damn! In an instant my movement was stopped!

I had to admit it. I had gotten used to the opponents cooperating. My backup for Leo wasn't going to make it in time! "Leo! Run!" At my voice, Leo hurriedly tried to jump back—but he didn't make it! The small shadow that kicked off the ground and tore through the smoke crouched low and brushed past him as it passed!

After landing, Leo tried to take more distance— "Guh.....!" Groaning, he slumped down! "Leo!" As I rushed over to him, he knitted his brows. ".....The inside of my shoes is all squelchy and slimy.....!" "Not that kind of trial style again!?" ".....This is the trial I give....." In a place slightly apart, the small shadow stopped.

As the wind blew and the smoke cleared, her form gradually became visible! A young person with straight long black hair and large eyes. ".....As we passed each other..... into both of your shoes..... I put beef tendon nikogori (jellied broth)....."

Ugh. This girl said something ridiculous. Just for the sake of explanation, nikogori is a substance made of gelatinous material that is extracted by thoroughly boiling cheap meat; it has the characteristic of hardening when cold and becoming squelchy. If consumed in moderation, it's good for health, but it feels terrible to have it put inside your shoes.

As the smoke in the area cleared, Lavi and the other three Ladies were standing a little further away, and the "Young Lady" who had just blown past us was wearing a smile of certain victory. She continued toward Leo. ".....Life is not always lived in shoes that are constantly comfortable..... there are times when you must walk in squelchy shoes without giving up, enduring as you go..... This is my..... trial to test your patience....." "Shut up with that 'Freezey Bridgey' (Freezing/Squelching Bridge) talk."

"That's 'Whistle' (Hyuu)!?" Instead of a retort, I'd fire a spell! I should have just frozen the Young Lady who was defenselessly rambling and the three Ladies standing apart!

Realistically, if I considered that my opponent always carried beef tendon nikogori with them, I should have struck them down first! Emotionally too! If something like this were, by some miracle, planted in my pillow at the inn!

"Don't panic!" "A-Ah! Ai-san!" "Ai-san!" The one who shouted at the other flustered Ladies was the large blonde one. She directed a relaxed smile toward us. "Heh. Even if you've defeated Ai-san now, the squelchiness in your shoes won't disappear. The situation won't change at all!"

"Guh.....! Certainly, in these squelchy shoes, I'll be sinking every time I walk! What the hell am I supposed to do!?" Leo groaned, tormented by the victorious Ladies.

I called out to him from the side. "Hey, hey. Don't get discouraged, stand up. For now, just wash them in that river over there and change into the new shoes we'll buy in the next town." "Ehh—!?" "Is that an option!?" The Ladies were aghast. "Wait a minute! Ai-san went through all the trouble of explaining it so menacingly, and that's your reaction!?"

"I wonder if recent young people have no sense of wastefulness, easily saying things like 'I'll just buy new shoes'!" "If you repair damaged shoes, you can wear them for quite a while!"

I directed a cold gaze at them as they spoke. My tone had become like an ordinary Lady's, though "Ugh." Seeing them flinch, I continued. "And don't get me wrong. It's not that we passed this person's trial. It's just that life isn't always lived in comfort. Even so, there are times when you have to walk. But, other than just continuing to endure, there is also a way to remove the cause of the discomfort. The person who just blew past us said to endure, but simply following what you're told isn't what it means to truly overcome a trial.

This is, to be sure, something to be praised, and certainly not something to be criticized." "But still.....! No, however! This is a trial of endurance!" To the large Lady who was still trying to argue back, I said composedly:
"If there's any solution other than endurance, then as a trial of endurance, it's a failure, isn't it?" Despite the Madame saying something or other. That's when this happened—

"Either way, we're retreating for now!" The words that rang out were Lavi's.
"I've realized that a direct confrontation is clearly disadvantageous. We will regroup and revise our strategy!" Dammit! This person is surprisingly good at reading the situation! "Hurry!" she said, turning on her heel and dashing away!
"You think I'll let you get away?! If I let them regroup here, things will definitely become a pain!" I hurriedly began chanting an incantation.

The Madames, perhaps concerned for their companion who had been turned into a block of ice, hesitated for a moment, but eventually followed after Lavi as she retreated. But at that moment, the spell I was chanting while chasing after the Lavi was completed— Just then, Lavi, who was running at the front, veered off the road and dashed into the forest on the side! Don't look away, Madames! Dammit!

"Freeze Arrow!" The arrows of cold air I released flew like the wind, but they were blocked by tree branches and leaves, failing to reach their target! I thought about pursuing them, but being lured in while chasing too deep would be bad. In the end, I remained on the spot.

"……Leo……"
"Yeah."
"The next time those guys show up…… it probably won't be this easy."
"I know."

As I gazed at the area where Lavi and the Madames had vanished, Leo and I exchanged those words—— The Strongest Madames, three remain!

(Overcoming the Trial of the Lion: To be continued!)

[Next Time Preview] Lina and Leo, having defeated four of the Strongest Madames! However, the strongest Madames are people who harass others' fiancés, and for what reason do they leave their homes, husbands, children, and mothers-in-law behind? Are their family relationships actually harmonious?! Such is the next installment! "Overcoming the Trial of the Lion" Part Two!

[Overcoming the Lion’s Trial Part 2]

Recap: Lina was asked to do a job by a man named Leo. Now she’s his guard! In the town of Filai where he lives, there is a custom where a man must go pick an Arania flower and give it to his partner when getting married, and it is also considered part of the trial for someone to interfere with that, or for someone to hire a guard to oppose the trial.

Lina took the job half on a whim, but before the two could depart, Leo’s lover, Lavi—no, the expert of harassment, leading the Filai's Strongest Seven Madames—stood in their way!

In order to polish Leo’s character, Lavi and the others intended to give him even more difficult trials! Having towels at the inn dampened or putting slime inside shoes, Lina defeated four of the Madames amidst such numerous harsh trials! Three Madames and Lavi remain! Will Leo truly be able to overcome these trials?!

The clamor of customers and the scent of cooking. The dining room on the first floor of the inn was crowded with customers at dinner time. "If things keep going at this rate, we'll reach the place where the Arania flowers are around noon tomorrow." At a table in a corner of the dining room, Leo, who had finished ordering various dishes from the lady at the shop, spoke. "Just promise me… Lina-san, I want you to keep the location a secret. If word gets out and all sorts of people come to pick the Arania flower, the ceremony might become impossible to hold." "Understood. Then I won't ask about the location. I'll have you show me the way after we leave the inn tomorrow." "Sorry. I appreciate that."

That said, Lavi and the remaining Madames also knew the location of the Arania flower. There was more than enough possibility of an ambush. In addition to Lavi, three of the Filai's Strongest Madames remained. From the time I defeated the Madame who put slime in the shoes this morning until now, there hadn't been a single attack or interference.

So then, how would they come at us next? In any case, I couldn't afford to let my guard down. "……But the people of Filai always do this kind of thing when they get married? Well, I don't mean to complain about the custom, but." "I suppose so. There's

an old legend passed down in the town about a woman named Arania who was kidnapped from the town, and her lover chased after her and took her back. It's unclear if it's a true story, but that story seems to be the basis for the ceremony." "I see," I said, convinced. They were replacing the kidnapped woman with a flower and retracing the legend. "And besides. For those living a normal life, there’s no need to even leave the town, but when it comes time for the ceremony, they get to see people from other towns and villages.

It’s a treat, so there are people who even volunteer for the role of interfering with the ceremony, so they can enjoy the trip while interfering every now and then." "Hmph." I was mostly convinced. In other words, this ceremony was a trip under the pretext of a trial.

Leaving the town they were accustomed to living in, it was a way to broaden their horizons and spread their wings at the same time. The rules for the interferers and the rules for the collaborators were also for the sake of the many people traveling together.

"So normally, it's a relatively laid-back ceremony. ……Even so, this time…… putting slime in shoes is one thing, but being attacked by Goblins and such is quite un-stylish……" "What are you saying, Lina-san!" At my murmur, Leo raised his voice in a rough manner. "Don't underestimate slime! Being attacked by Goblins is but a moment, but having slime in your shoes continues forever and ever!" "Is it more of a big deal than being attacked by Goblins?!" No, I also prioritize the Madame who uses slime over the Goblins, but I felt a bit superior to the Madame who put slime in the shoes.

At my words, Leo started to say something again, but as if he suddenly came to his senses, he drew a small breath and— "No…… anyway for now, which is the bigger deal, being attacked by slime or Goblins?"

"Let's set aside that debate. It'll just end up on parallel lines." "Parallel lines?! Maybe in your mind!" I instinctively wanted to retort, but I realized that saying it here would only start a meaningless argument. I held back and kept my mouth shut.

Leo, with a serious gaze, said, "More importantly, about the Strongest Seven Madames. They are also basically in the position of enjoying the trip by being on the interference side and venting their daily stress. However! The reason they vent it in this trial is the stress born from the friction with their mothers-in-law and

sisters-in-laws on a daily basis, which has condensed, shrunk, and sublimated to the point where it could even knock a flying bird out of the sky with its toxic fumes!

On top of that, this time, because Lavi loves me, she's asking those Seven Madames for even more difficult trials. I can't even imagine what's going to happen, honestly." "……Whether Lavi really loves Leo or not, I have a slight doubt about that point…… but regardless of that."

"Don't you know what kind of techniques or specialties the Madames have?" "No. If we knew the contents in advance, we could take measures. If that were the case, it could no longer be called a trial. That's why the horror of the Strongest Seven Madames is rumored, but what each of them does is a mystery."

"Hmph…… a pain, isn't it……" I knew about the Goblin user and the one who used a lasso…… but as for the remaining one, what kind of technique would she use? While we were talking, the lady of the shop brought the drinks Lina and Leo had ordered, but Leo, without caring about the eyes of others, said— "But! No matter what kind of trial befalls us, I will definitely overcome everything and marry Lavi!" "Your determination is fine, but don't say such things so loudly. To people who don't know our circumstances, It will look like Lavi refers to me and that I am currently being proposed to. People will get the wrong idea."

While keeping a slight eye on the gazes of the customers around us, I muttered, “...Well, I don’t really get it myself... but do you really want to get married that badly?” When I asked him that, a gentle smile appeared on his face and he replied, “I suppose so. Everyone does it as a matter of course; some people probably think it’s a mundane, worthless thing. They might say there are more important things, things that *should* be done. It certainly might be a mundane thing, but it’s never a worthless one.

Creating a family, leaving behind the next generation, and connecting the generations is a very important thing. For example, if at some point everyone simultaneously decided that getting married and having children was worthless and stopped having kids, then a hundred years later, there wouldn't be anyone left in the world. In a world where no one remains, all those 'important things' and 'things that should be done' that people spoke of would lose all their meaning. That’s why I think getting married and having a family is a mundane thing, but a very important one.” “.....Hmm—.....”

I gave a vague response. I understood that leaving behind descendants to bridge the eras and marrying for that purpose was important, but— “That’s an 'explanation for

wanting to' rather than the 'reason why you want to' marry, right? But Leo, even if you're attacked by Goblins or your boots get all slimy inside, you still want to overcome that and marry Lavi, don't you?" "it's hard to explain that feeling in words, I guess you'll understand once you find someone you like someday, Lina-kun. If I were to give the number one reason... I suppose it's that. If you get married, you can call each other 'darling' and 'honey' with the person you love, and you can flirt and make out from morning till night while laughing 'u-fu-fu' and 'a-ha-ha' without anyone complaining," he said.

"You desire to become a stupid acting couple like that?! ...Well, I guess people have different tastes, but..." Someday, even if I were to fall in love with someone—I hoped I'd never end up like *that*... I took a sip of the Linos Apple juice that had been brought to me Huh—!?

I turned a smile toward Leo, who was about to bring the sparkling wine he had ordered to his lips,

"It's you—" I fixed my eyes on her, and the moment I said it, "One of the Madams!" The wrist I had grabbed crumbled away with a *slurp*! At the same time, a white mist covered the surroundings! "What—!?" I leaped back at the same time as Leo! Amidst the surprised cries of the shop's customers, the old woman was surrounded by mist.

"...Kukuku... To think you'd deduce my true identity from the taste of a drink..." The voice echoing from the mist was one of the Filly Strongest Seven Madams! A Madam with a large build and blonde hair! But based on the voice, it was the voice of the large-build, blonde Madam, yet she looked nothing like the old woman from before. And this white powder was familiar— At the same time, a certain smell tickled my nose. It was scattered all over the place. —This smell is—Oh! I looked at the palm of the hand that had just grabbed my opponent. It was covered in white powder.

There was no mistake. This was—face powder! "I've got you read like a book!" I couldn't help but raise my voice. "Your special skill—it's a disguise using heavy makeup!" That's right! The woman who had appeared before us as a large-framed, blonde Madam had likely been a naturally slender person!

By layering on thick makeup, she had changed her physical build, changed her face, and turned herself into another person! At yesterday's inn, the person who had pulled off that subtle act of harassment in Leo's room had been this person, posing as a member of the inn staff! Like a lizard cutting off its tail, she had left only the face powder around the arm that I had grabbed.

She scattered the powder she wore to use as a smoke screen to escape! But there was no reaction from within the white mist. Before long, the white powder thinned and settled, and beyond it, I could see the other customers coughing and cursing. —Could it be!

“Wait! Did someone just come out of this white mist!?” When I asked, one of the customers replied, “A man just went out, but...”

“Where is he now!?” “That guy... he flew out of the shop... what the hell was that?” said another customer. .....I blew it! The blonde Madam—now the Heavy Makeup Madam—had removed the makeup that made her look exactly like the shop’s old woman. Then she used the face powder as a smoke screen, and instantaneously disguised herself as a man to escape!

“Lina-kun.....!” “I let her get away.” I responded to Leo’s question, I answered with my back still turned. “No, let's think of it as having driven her away. If you hadn't noticed, I would have been done in by the drug she put in the drink.” “.....At any rate, it might be better to change inns. There’s a good chance she’ll come back to strike when we’re feeling relieved after repelling her.” I nodded slightly to Leo as he turned to speak to me. The scent of greenery hit my nose. In the midst of a nameless mountain where not even a beast trail existed, the two of us followed Leo’s lead.

After the attack by the Heavy Makeup Madam last night.We changed our inn and used a fake name to take a room just in case. Thanks to that, or perhaps for some other reason, there had been no attacks since last night. This morning, we departed the inn and, under Leo’s guidance, left the highway and traveled through places where no one else would go, treading through wasteland and trees.

The temperature was high for this season, and I was starting to break into a damp sweat. I asked Leo, who was walking ahead, “We’ll reach the place with the flowers around noon, right? That’s the plan, isn't it?” “Yeah. If we keep this pace, we should arrive by noon.” He answered while looking straight ahead.

“Then—if there’s likely an ambush, tell me when we get close.” “I know. If possible, I’d like to find the opponent first and take the initiative.” “Yeah. Got it.” Leo replied, and the two of us pushed further ahead. Eventually, we came upon a small stream. As we walked upstream, the temperature around us rose little by little, but certainly that couldn’t be because of— “.....Eh.....?”

Seeing that, I couldn’t help but let out a gasp. By the side of the stream, white material was piled up on the ground here and there. “Snow.....?” I muttered, but the

temperature wasn't low enough for snow to remain unmelted. Leo, who was walking ahead, looked back at me over his shoulder.

"It's salt." "Salt!?" Startled, I crouched down and tried to touch the white lump with my fingertip— "Don't eat it. It's full of impurities and will probably upset your stomach." I was scolded and pulled my finger away. Instead, I prodded it with the toe of my boot; it certainly felt different from snow.

".....I've heard of this before. There was a salt lake here, but the water evaporated, so you can find salt in the mountains this far from the sea." "I don't know the logic behind how it was formed, though." "Is this that kind of place?" "It's all salt up ahead, and the place where the Arania flowers are is right there." "There.....? You mean flowers are blooming in the middle of being buried in salt?"

I had never heard of such a thing as flowers blooming in a place full of salt— "Ah. Didn't I mention it? It's better for you to see it directly than for me to explain. It's getting close. .....Understood. Let's stop the idle chatter then. I'll keep my footsteps as quiet as possible. Since there's a high possibility of an ambush, I'll move while keeping a bit of distance from the stream." "Got it."

After that, the two of us fell silent and began moving through the sparse trees a short distance from the stream. As we proceeded, the area covered in white became wider, and the trees became more scattered. Eventually. —*Bushu*. From ahead, I heard a sound like water spurting out.

I stopped for a moment—and after a while, I heard it again. —*Bushu*. My vision opened up. Ahead was a shimmering silver world—though it was perhaps a bit dirty to call it that. The valleys created by the vying mountain peaks were covered in salt, and the passage of time had allowed a refined grime to cling to the salt's surface.

Around us were tree branches with salt icicles hanging from them, and trees that had become like kamakura snow huts covered in salt.

Rocks were also rolling around, but there was no sign of the Madams. —*Bushu!* Along with the sound, water suddenly geysered up from within the salt on the ground some distance away, and then stopped immediately. "A geyser, I suppose? Is that why the temperature is so high?"

The hot water that spurted out for an instant scattered in the air like mist, became spray, and danced down onto the land of salt. When I shifted my gaze to the foreground, a portion of black ground revealed itself, and from there, the water that had welled up was turning into a small stream.

And then, from here and there on the ground nearby, semi transparent crystals of various sizes were growing. I finally understood. Those crystals—were the Arania flowers. A field of salt. Geysers. Impurities mixed in the salt, the geography, the climate, et cetera.

Various factors overlapped to create those crystals that looked like flowers in this land. ......If I thought about it carefully, if the Arania flower were a plant, the people of the town of Filly wouldn't be able to hold the ceremony or get married outside of the blooming season.

"The Madams don't seem to be here," Leo whispered by my side. "No—they are," I replied in a low voice. I couldn't see them, but they were definitely there. I could sense their presence. "Where?" Leo asked. "I don't know. They might not have noticed us yet, but I'm certain they're here."

I thought for a moment about how to proceed. "......How about this? First, I'll go and pick the Arania flower." "No," Leo flatly rejected the idea. "But if I do that—" "There's no point unless I'm the one who picks the flower. So, that's a no-go," he said, staring at me with a serious expression.

......From my perspective, that kind of obsession was irrational, but for Leo, it was an important detail. "Alright, I understand. If that's the case—I'll support you with magic as best as I can. But please, be careful."

We looked at each other and nodded, then we stepped out into the white wasteland. I began chanting a spell under my breath, while Leo headed toward the crystalline flowers without a second glance at the smaller crystals nearby.

At that moment, Lavi's voice rang out across the area! "To think, I thought you'd settle for just any flower. I can't believe you're choosing a flower on purpose like this!" Leo didn't panic, though he quickly scanned the area; her form remained invisible.

"Of course I wouldn't choose just any one. It's the flower I'm giving to you, after all." Whether that line was sweet or cheesy was a matter of opinion, but Lavi fell silent for a moment. "......I won't go easy on you just because it's a trial." "Yeah. I know," Leo replied, nodding at her words.

Meanwhile, I still hadn't been able to find Lavi. Judging by her voice, she shouldn't have been far away... but was she using a spell to project her voice from elsewhere? No, if she could do something like that, she probably would have attacked with magic by now.

The fact that she hadn't meant—that's it! "If that's the case... Here I go!" Using Lavi's voice as a signal, I cut off the spell I had been chanting and hurried to cast another. A high-pitched sound like a whistle echoed out—a sound I remembered.

It was the sound of the finger-whistle used by one of the Madams to control goblins! They probably intended to summon goblins one after another to set them on us while they stayed hidden—but I wasn't going to let that happen! "Deim Win!" (Magic Wind!) This was a spell that merely created a gale. But the wind that blew forth scattered the salt that had accumulated... and something else.

All of a sudden, a pile of rocks a short distance away crumbled! Emerging from within were Lavi and three Madams! That was it! Lavi and the others had been hiding by using thick white makeup to blend into the salt plains! Once I saw them, the advantage was mine! But in that instant, one of the Madams moved! It was the one with red hair wearing a baggy black sweater!

She swung both arms, and from her sleeves, countless black cords shot out toward Leo and me! These were—the small throwing cords I had seen before?! If it were just one or two, it wouldn't be a problem, but getting caught by many at once would be troublesome. While continuing my chant, I leapt sideways to dodge!

Leo was a fraction of a second slower, and about five of the cords caught his sleeve, his hair, and the edge of his clothes! But this was also within my calculations! As long as they were holding Leo, the enemy Madams couldn't move freely!I finished my spell— "Flare Arrow!"

The dozen or so fire arrows I produced shot toward the Madam with the throwing cords! "I won't let you!" Standing in the way was the large, blonde Madam covered in thick makeup, who began scattering white powder into the path of the flames!

Suddenly, the space between us exploded! It was a dust explosion. The powder was highly flammable when dispersed in the air. The Madam knew this and intentionally caused the explosion, using the blast to blow my spell away!

"So you know this phenomenon... have you blown up your own house a few times, Madam?!" I shouted. But the Madam who released the powder didn't get off scot-free! She was sent flying and was slammed into the salty ground. Her makeup crumbled away!

.....I knew it was just her makeup crumbling, but she looked like some kind of dying monster. The Madam with the throwing cords was barely unharmed, but the cords that had been binding Leo were burnt away by the explosion. Including Lavi, there were now only three of them left!

One of them, the Madam who had called the goblins, was still frantically whistling. "Come, Goblins! Why won't you come!" Her high-pitched whistle echoed hollowly through the peaks surrounding the salt plains.

.....So that was it. How careless of me. "It's no use no matter how much you call!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. "Your technique relies on delicate finger-whistle control to lead the goblins! But in this place, the echoes are so fine they easily wash out that delicacy! In short, you can't control goblins here!"

"Th... that's ridiculous...!" Shaken by my pointing this out, the Madam blew the whistle several more times—but she was no longer a threat. That left— " Throw all the cords you have at my hand!" It was Lavi who gave the order to the Throwing Cord Madam. "? But...!" "I'll explain later! If we lose like this, it'll disgrace the name of the Strongest Madams!" ".....Understood!" Answering Lavi, the Madam shook her sleeves! Tens, hundreds, thousands of black cords shot out from those sleeves!

"Lavi, Connect!" Lavi shouted as she caught the cords in her right hand. She used her whole body like a spring to twist away, swinging the cords—and the Madam attached to the end of them—around in a great circle! "Wait... Lavi...!" The Madam's voice of protest was ignored! "Madam Hammer!" Lavi's scream echoed! I jumped back instinctively as a blur of wind and shadow passed before my eyes—the "Madam Hammer" accompanied by the Madam's own screams!

Lavi continued to swing the Throwing Cord Madam around and around! It looked like a black vortex! "Stop it already, Lavi!" Leo finally called out to Lavi as she made her final stand. "Even with the Strongest Madams, it didn't work! You should know by now that you can't stop me here!" "I know that!" Lavi answered with a tearful voice.

She was crying, but her hands swinging the Madam didn't rest for a second. .....No. If anything, Lavi might be much stronger than the other Madams. Had she fainted from the centrifugal force? The Throwing Cord Madam wasn't even screaming anymore.

"But I can't! I can't back down here!" Lavi cried, still swinging the Madam around. "If it ends this easily, everyone will think the trial was soft! They'll say Leo isn't a great man! I can't stand you being bad-mouthed like that! That's why! I'll give you a harsher trial! At least two or three broken ribs!" *Whoa, scary! This person is scary!* I thought.

Maybe this was what they called "true love," but I begged to differ. But since I was hired as a bodyguard, I couldn't allow that! "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to end this!" Lavi's swings were fast and powerful, but they left her wide open! I reached for my left side, unfastening my short sword along with its scabbard, and timed my move as she swung the Madam—

Without hesitation, I dashed forward! ——If I drove the tip of my short sword's scabbard into the ground at the right spot, the cords would get snagged on it. Using that as a pivot, I intended to make the Madam and Lavi collide—well, that was the plan.

As soon as she saw my movement, Lavi’s eyes gleamed with an eerie light! Keeping her right hand in position, she instantly flipped her body and thrust her left hand far back, catching the cords connected to the Madam in her palm! Using that as a new pivot, the trajectory and rotation cycle of the "Madam Hammer" changed! It was a timing and path I hadn't expected; a chill ran down my spine! ——A direct hit!

This was the only way to dodge! I slid across the ground, falling onto my back! By a hair's breadth, the Madam passed just above me, white eyes bulging! But as I tried to get up, would Lavi give me the time?! When I looked up, Lavi was changing the hammer's trajectory, swinging it down for a strike aimed straight at me! With this timing—I wouldn't make it! "Stop it, Lavi!" A black shadow leapt into my field of vision! It was Leo’s voice that rang out!

I wondered what I should do by jumping in now. For Lavi, stopping her hand wasn't an option; instead, it was like killing two birds with one stone! But! In that split second, Lavi twisted her body, and the Madam changed her trajectory, missing Leo and me and plunging into the salty earth!

There was a brief silence. "Why... why did you protect the guard...?" At Lavi's question, Leo answered without hesitation, "It’s decided, Lavi. Because I didn't want to see you hurting someone." "That... that’s decided too... there’s no way I could hurt you!" Lavi’s voice echoed across the salt plains.

...Eh? Which meant that Lavi didn't actually dislike Leo that much, or rather, she was seriously in love and trying to give him a trial. I felt like there were various issues with that in itself, but... "Lavi..." Leo called her name gently, but at that moment!

"Bushuuuuuuuuuuu!" From the ground where the throwing rope madam had dug in, a massive amount of hot water suddenly erupted into the empty sky! Perhaps the ground had been fragile to begin with, or perhaps it was because of Lavi’s sheer idiotic strength.

The hot water that shot high into the sky scattered in the void and turned into a hot rain, pouring down on the area— "The Arania flowers!" At Leo’s scream, by the time Lavi and I noticed, it was too late.

I bathed in the spray of hot water, and the crystals that had been blooming all over the place melted and crumbled one after another.

"This is it! This is truly the trial!" Lavi clutched her fists and raised a voice of joy, while I muttered to myself. "That’s all well and good... but if this is the case, you won't be able to pick the Arania flowers no matter how hard you try, and at this rate, your marriage to Leo might not be recognized, right?" "Pikih!" She froze mid-motion. As far as I could see, the Arania flowers seemed to be completely ruined...

"This means, basically, the Arania Flower Ceremony can’t be held anymore, right? ...I’ll be scolded. By everyone in town, every single one of them." At my cold point-of-view, Lavi began to tremble violently.

"Wh... what should I do, Leo! I, I didn't mean for this to happen...!" Facing the panicked girl, Leo gave a gentle smile. "Don't worry, Lavi! We have love, don't we!" "Th-that’s true, but can love do something about the Arania flowers!?" To her question, Leo slowly shook his head side-to-side.

"That’s not it. That’s not what I meant, Lavi." He called out softly, stepped closer, and gently held her shoulders. "Lavi, I wanted to say this. Let's just ditch everything and run away somewhere, the two of us, and everything will be okay!" "That's it, Leo!" "What do you mean 'that's it'!?" I instinctively retorted. Well, it wasn't like Lavi had ruined the Arania flowers on purpose, so it felt a bit pitiful to blame her too much.

More than that, what concerned me was: "Or rather, what about my commission fee!?" "Of course I'll pay it now!" "Then it's okay!" At Leo’s incredibly manly reply, I responded with a thumbs-up. Thus, leaving Leo and Lavi, who were still desperately blowing the finger-whistle at the madam and the unconscious madam, I left the place with all my might.

Love is sometimes a deep sin. Especially for the people around them. I received the remainder of the commission fee and then parted ways with Leo and Lavi. I didn't know what happened to those two after that, but there was one thing I could say for certain. This was yet another town I would never be able to set foot in for the rest of my life.

(End of "Overcoming the Lion’s Trial Part 2")

[Goat Riders Part 1]

Suddenly, a shadow was cast over me. I instinctively leapt backward—and it landed right in front of my eyes. It was a man riding a beast on a nameless highway running between mountains.

A man had dropped down from the craggy, exposed rocky cliffs on the right side. It was a steep area, the kind of place where a bandit might perfectly ambush a target... but he didn't seem like that kind of opponent.

The man, while maintaining a tense atmosphere, directed a sharp gaze at me. "Woman, I ask you, have you seen a suspicious man around here?" "Eh!? A 'wait for the retort' type!?" At the question, I unintentionally raised my voice. Because—the man had his nose and mouth hidden with a cloth, and moreover, he was riding a creature that could only be seen as a giant goat. I didn't need to explain what kind of creature a goat was. It was none other than that "meee-ing" goat.

It was a goat. However, the size was completely different. It was probably as big as a horse. That was exactly why it was a "Giant Goat," a description for which there was no other way to put it. For such a thing to suddenly drop down from above and for him to ask a question like that, I felt that at the very least, a "You're the suspicious one!" retort was the minimum social moral requirement, but the opponent didn't seem to desire that.

As I furrowed my brows, the man spoke in an irritated tone. "I asked if you saw the man—" "Stop right there!" Interrupting the question again, a voice rang out! "Wh-what!? That voice is!?" The goat-man looked around!

"Where are you looking! I am right here! Tou-oh!" Along with a vigorous shout, a man stepped out from the shade of a thicket on the left, looking quite ordinary— This was overwhelming— I instinctively held my breath. He looked to be in his late twenties. He was riding a giant goat and wearing rough hunter-like clothes.

He had a square jaw and thick golden eyebrows that suggested a strong will. But—that hair was black and perfectly styled in a 7-3 part! Furthermore, no matter how you looked at it, it was floating! "Th... this is...!" I was overwhelmed by his presence and involuntarily took a half-step back.

I had heard rumors—was this the guy they called "Katsura" (Wig)!? Katsura. Or otherwise known as "Zura." No... it was a camouflage item that people with hair-related inconveniences wore on their heads. On my travels, I had met many different people, but for some reason, I had never been deeply involved with a person who wore a "Katsura." wig

However... Even though I had heard the rumors, now that I had actually faced it, I was at a loss for how to handle it...! Regardless of my inner turmoil, the man who had hidden his mouth with a cloth showed signs of agitation.

"Vold, you bastard...!?" The man called Vold stood tall against the Zura-man—no, the man called Vold stood magnificently,

"Have you already bared your fangs at the passersbys, 'Crime Genesis'!?" He spoke the name of the evil organization with a loud, clear voice. "But as long as I am here, your ambitions will surely be crushed!" "Don't talk nonsense! For someone like you to crush me here! Go! Roar and kick the belly of the goat's reins!"

"......Meeee....." A giant goat kicked the earth and started running with a cry! With a speed that surpassed a famous horse, it charged toward Vold! But! "Before me and my beloved goat, Tempest, there are no enemies! Tou! Goat Rider J-u-u-u-mp!"

Using Vold’s roar as a signal, the giant goat called Tempest kicked the earth and soared high into the air! And then! "Goat Rider K-i-i-i-i-ck!" While borrowing the momentum of the fall, he somersaulted with the goat's hind legs leading the way, and unleashed a kick toward the oncoming goat rider! —I saw it. The moment Tempest’s hind legs folded and struck the opponent rider—they extended greatly! The speed and weight of the fall, plus the goat's leg strength!

Furthermore, the speed of the opponent who was charging! What kind of destructive power must it have been when all of those were combined? It was terrifying just to imagine!

Gakaah! The sound of the impact was like thunder. "........!?" The man who had hidden his mouth was blown off of the goat he was riding without even being able to scream, and he tumbled onto the ground! The man probably didn't even know what kind of attack he had received. Vold lowered his body and continued his charge.

To anyone watching, it must have looked as if Vold and the goat had vanished. And then, in the next instant, a single strike. He collapsed onto the earth, his movements stopping as he let out a breath. "......C... Crime... Genesis... glory... wait, what...!" Leaving behind those words of loyalty to his organization, he lost consciousness just like that.

The giant goat, having lost its rider, slowed its pace to a confused walk and began to eat the grass nearby. When I realized what was happening—I was completely captivated by that brief exchange of offense and defense.

"Hands sweating," truly described this moment. Of course, since I was Lina Inverse, I had often found myself embroiled in trouble and combat throughout my travels. But compared to some greenhorn soldier, I had much more experience and was well-accustomed to seeing various battles. However! Whether a fighter's wig would fly off in the wind or not! With that element added, how much more thrilling it became! I had learned that for the first time! In other words, for us sorcerers, "My master is all things"—meaning there was something to be learned from anything.

There was such a saying, and this was exactly the case for it! Well, I didn't think learning something like this would be useful at all in my future life! To me, who was feeling triumphant over my new discovery, Vold didn't even bask in the afterglow of victory; he just cast his gaze toward me.

"Are you alright?" "Eh? Well... yeah..." Or rather, I didn't know if he intended to do something to me or not... but for now, I figured I should say thanks for him worrying about me. "Thanks. But, Vold, you didn't seem to like my response; you have a harsh expression, don't look down on them. It’s too late once they’ve caused harm. Actually, my friend died because of... Crime Genesis—" He suddenly started saying something heavy.

"Crime Genesis—" It sounded exactly like the name of an evil secret society, but honestly, what was the deal with this goat-riding man Vold had just defeated? "Look at this." As he said that, Vold's hands went up. He touched his own head—wait, what, that's...!?

Was he going to take it off? The wig. Should I look away? Or should I stare? While I was frozen in hesitation, his hand lifted the wig—and from beneath it, short blonde hair appeared! "Ah! Phew—!" I let out a voice without thinking, though I wasn't sure if it was out of disappointment or relief. Vold paid no mind to my reaction; he stared intensely at the wig he had removed. "This wig is... a memento of my friend..."

I see. "Look," he said about the wig. I see. I see. It was a bit cool to wear a friend's memento into battle, but... as expected, since the object was what it was, it felt like the friend was crying in the shadows of the grass, begging him to stop. Vold carefully tucked the wig into his shirt while continuing his serious tone. "When I wear this, I can become as strong as my friend. They are an evil group plotting world domination!"

"I continue to fight day and night to crush those wicked ambitions! You just happened to be unlucky and got caught up in their actions, but for now, you're safe." That being said... "This area is still within their sphere of influence. I'll escort you to the next town." "Ah. No, well, I think I'm fine on my own." For now, I tried to decline.

To be honest, I found it incredibly annoying from the bottom of my heart to be followed around by a strange person riding a giant goat. However, from my experience, this type of person wouldn't listen even if I declined. Vold let out a small smile. "Don't worry. I won't ask for a reward later. Well... I suppose I'll just follow you until you reach a safe place, if that's alright with you." "Well... if you're saying that out of kindness..."

I grumbled reluctantly. I wouldn't welcome him, but the road was a deserted highway with hardly any foot traffic. There was no one to cast curious glances at us anyway. "Sigh..." I started walking down the road, and Vold followed behind me.

The sound of hooves echoed behind me. I just kept walking down the road—"...Hmm..." Since I couldn't avoid the involvement, I knew in my head it was better not to care, but I just couldn't help but be curious.

"I want to ask—" I opened my mouth and looked back over my shoulder, meeting eyes with the goat. The goat was so big that its eyes were at the same level as mine. I flinched for a second but regained my composure. "...The guy from before and you too... Why are you riding goats instead of horses?" When I asked while keeping my pace, he even flashed a relaxed smile. "Because the mountain is there."

"What is that supposed to mean?" "Beyond the mountain to the right, another highway runs."

"On the map, it's not very far from this highway, but as you can see, what separates them is a steep, rocky mountain where no path exists. It's impossible to cross with a horse. Using a horse to transport goods would take many days to circle around the highway. However, if it's a goat accustomed to the mountains, and just a small amount of luggage, they can deliver it in a short time by crossing the mountain. Thus, in this area, people made a living by using goats to transport goods over the mountains, and they came to be called Goat Riders. I was one of them." Vold spoke in the past tense.

"But!" Sad to say, among those Goat Riders, there was one who harbored ambition! "The one who schemed to take all the Goat Riders under his wing and rule the world—! 'The world is impossible, come on...' My mutter was, of course, ignored, and Vold continued his heated speech. "And the organization that was born is 'Crime Genesis'! To them, goats are just a means to transport goods; they are a heartless group that chooses to win by any means!"

No, even if you say they "choose to win by any means" about something like that. "If we leave them be, the world will eventually fall into their hands!" "...Is that so...?" "It's probably hard for you, not knowing the situation, to feel a sense of crisis. But! By the time they become dangerous enough for ten thousand people to realize, the organization will be too big, and it'll be too late! Even now, they've grown into an organization with a thousand goats!

So I have to strike them while I can! That's why I will continue to fight them, even if I'm alone!" "......I... I see. Well, good luck with that." For now, I gave a half-hearted response. Just what kind of ambition did they harbor? And what was the fate that lay between Vold and them? At least for now, I didn't care about any of that! Besides, I felt like an organization like that wouldn't cause any harm even if left alone. I continued forward, half-ignoring Vold as he spoke of the evils of Crime Genesis.

Eventually, a small village appeared at the end of the road. It was a tiny basin nestled between mountains, where buildings were huddled together as if for warmth. "If we've come this far, I should be safe, right?" I said this, hoping he would stop following me. Vold had a dubious expression.

"Do you have business in that village?" "No, I'm just planning to go a little further. The sun is still high, and I don't know if that village has an inn for travelers." When I answered honestly, he furrowed his brows. "Then it's too early to feel relieved. Once we pass through the village and let our guard down, they might come for us. I'll see you a little further." So it came to that. I thought as much.

However, well, if being a Goat Rider was popular around here, then Vold being with me wouldn't draw curious eyes. There was no need to force him away. I thought that way and headed toward the village without worrying about it.

It was strange, what I felt as soon as I entered the village. There were villagers around. An old man weeding a small field, an old lady washing vegetables in a creek, a guy chopping wood in a yard. When they noticed us, they cast flickering glances our way, and when I looked back, they quickly averted their eyes.

I closed the distance to Vold a bit and spoke in a voice only he could hear. "...This village is kind of weird. They're looking over here an awful lot... A traveler like you might be rare." He said it lightheartedly, but... as far as I could see, it wasn't like that. First of all, the villagers' gazes were directed at Vold, not me. "This is... perhaps... ......Hey, Vold....." "I want to ask, but are you an enemy of the group you mentioned earlier, Crime Genesis?"

"Yeah." He replied immediately, sounding like he hadn't thought about it at all. In a low voice, I continued my questioning. "So, that group is currently expanding its influence rapidly?" "That's right." "Then, don't you think it's possible that a tiny village like this could have completely fallen into their sphere of influence?" "......Wait... do you know what I'm trying to say...?" "Of course." "So you finally understand the danger of those guys?" "No. What I want to say is—"

Before I could finish, a change began in the village! The villagers nearby scurried away into their houses. In their place, appearing one after another from the shadows of barns and fences... there were about fifteen or sixteen of them! "Crime Genesis!?" Vold, finally realizing the situation, let out a voice of surprise. Indeed, the village had long since fallen under their control!

One of the men Vold had defeated earlier must have contacted them somehow, or perhaps this had been their base from the start; I couldn't be sure of the details. I had to admit, I had been careless. Because the opponent was riding a goat—an image that lacked any sense of urgency—I had inadvertently let my guard down.

However, thinking about it calmly, the danger of being with Vold, who was at odds with such a group, was high. It was too late for regrets now. From the front of the village and from behind, the goat riders surrounded us and approached slowly. All of them, just like the man from before, had the lower halves of their faces covered with cloth.

In other words—they intended to do something they couldn't be seen doing. As the goats came to a halt, one man stepped forward several paces alone, riding a large black goat and wearing a hood pulled low over his eyes.

Vold stopped the goat's movement and spoke. "……It has been a long time. Vold." I couldn't tell for sure because half of his face was hidden, but judging by his voice, he didn't seem to be much different in age from Vold.

Vold glared back at the man, a look of hostility surfacing in his eyes. "……Grandmaster Larken of Crime Genesis!" The man called Larken directed a cold gaze at Vold from

beneath his hood. "Vold…… cease this useless resistance. If you promise to return the item and lend us your aid, I am willing to let bygones be bygones."

In response to the inquiry, Vold remained silent for a moment—looking up at the blue sky visible beyond the rocky mountains. "—Once, I had a friend—" That gaze was surely fixed on distant days that would never return. "A friend who grew up with me as a goat rider, competing to see which of us would become the best in the world. That friend is…… no longer here……"

"—But!" Vold's right hand flashed! With the speed of a lightning bolt, he reached into his own breast pocket and pulled out an object. In his hand was a shaggy, black 7:3 ratio wig! "My friend's heart is right here!"

At the same moment he spoke, Vold donned the wig! "I will protect the peace of the goat riders! Ho…… Ho-zak! Come at me!" At Larken's flustered command, the goat riders tightened their reins all at once—

"As if I'd let you! Fireball!" I unleashed a spell I had been quietly chanting toward Larken. "Gugooah!" The ball of light I fired burst upon impact, scattering crimson flames! However, Larken managed to maneuver his black goat with a leap, narrowly escaping the strike. "To dodge that, it seems he's at least somewhat capable!" I flashed a confident smile at the questioning Larken. "……I have no intention of sticking my neck into trouble myself, though."

"I have no hobby of holding back against villains who commit evil deeds right in front of me while brushing off the falling sparks! It's just your bad luck that you decided to do as you pleased in front of me, Lina Inverse! You'd better give up and surrender!" I declared, flipping my cloak.

Though I wasn't particularly famous among these people, I had thought the name might make bandits flinch, but Larken responded with a look of confusion. "Villains!? ……Are you talking about us?" He seemed to be playing dumb, so I spat back the words. "Of course I'm talking about you!" Vold barked, backing me up.

"Think about whether what you're trying to do is justice or evil! And what was it, 'Crime Genesis'? What a blatantly evil name for an organization!" "—Wait just a minute." Larken spoke with a trace of bewilderment in his voice.

"I don't know what Vold told you, but aren't you misunderstanding something? In the first place, your pronunciation is wrong. Our organization's name is 'Climb Genesis'." Correcting the pronunciation, I gave a wry smile at the name. "What are you talking about? With that pronunciation, it sounds like 'Criminal' instead of 'Climb', so it sounds

like you're saying it means 'Mountain Climbing Beginners Association', doesn't it?" "Exactly. Our name is fine to interpret as 'Mountain Climbing Beginners Association'."

"……Eh." "Eeeeeeeeeeehh!? ……Wait, climbing……?" I looked around blankly and happened to lock eyes with Vold. He nodded deeply and solemnly. "Don't let it get to you. Anyone can make a mistake."

"Is climbing the right answer!? That's a confusing name!! Or rather, if you're not an illegal organization, why are you all hiding your faces!?" I asked, and Larken replied nonchalantly.

"……These are dust masks. The rocky mountains are dry and the dust kicks up easily." "……He's saying something incredibly normal. I've been looking at Vold this whole time thinking they were villains trying to take over the world…… and also,"

"About your friend being killed—" At my question, he nodded firmly. "Exactly! Climb Genesis is an organization founded to promote mutual aid among goat riders! We aim to narrow the wage gap between the top and the bottom, and to unify and clarify the fee system for cargo transport—we are a group planning to establish a foundation for the organization in this area and eventually expand branches across the peaks of the world!" "……Um…… that doesn't sound bad at all……" As I muttered this, Vold pointed a finger at Larken, veins popping on his forehead.

"Don't be deceived! Mutual aid might sound good! It might be a fine ideal to say you'll help those who can't work due to injury or those with immature skills! But that easily leads to complacency! If we abandon our mutual competition, people will inevitably come forth who slack off on their daily training and depend on the system! That is happening now!"

"My friend Larken, whom I competed with every day, has been tainted by the ideals of Climb Genesis and is now running around with paperwork! His skill as a goat rider has completely deteriorated!" Vold shouted.

"—What do you mean!?" Larken barked back. "If one surrenders themselves to the security of an organization and forgets even to hone their skills, the name of the goat rider will fall to the dirt! Tell me, what do you call that if not evil!?" Larken's response was a roar.

"Vold! Your skill as a goat rider is certainly top-class! Moreover, it's no exaggeration to say you have the best technique among goat riders, having never lost a head of livestock in ten years! That is why the transport fees you collect are also at the top

among us! In other words, that's why you oppose us!"
"If you acknowledge Climb Genesis, your income will decrease due to mutual aid fees and such, so you're just obstructing the foundation of the association with some high and mighty-sounding excuse, aren't you!?" "That…… that's not it is it?!" I couldn't help but interject. Vold had hesitated for a split second! "He hesitated! This person hesitated just now!"

Larken immediately followed up. "Don't make me laugh! If that's not the case, why did you…… uhm…… how should I put it…… steal my property as an act of harassment!?" I finally realized what Vold was holding.

Vold had described his parting with Larken as "a friend who died." In other words, he had taken what he called a memento from the friend who had "died" when he joined the organization. "Don't call it a wig!" "Don't call my wig a wig—!?" My imagination had been right on the mark.

Larken turned toward us and shouted. "So. The reason he wears his hood so low isn't to hide his face or for the sun, and certainly not for style. It's solely because he has a scalp as barren as a desert and cannot expose it to the public!" Larken regained his composure and glared at Vold.

"Vold! No matter what you think, it is a fact that there are those like the people of this village who understand our ideals! It may be your freedom to refuse to join us and continue transporting cargo alone, but!"

"But! To persist only in your own way of thinking, to obstruct the organization, and to steal the thing I…… cherished and put it on public display is a full-fledged crime! That itself is evil! I cannot overlook any further atrocities, even as your friend!"

"……Heh. Do you still call me friend?" Vold smiled defiantly, as if he had no further rebuttal. "Then let us settle this between fellow goat riders! We shall decide who is right with a goat race!" Whether he was at a loss for words or had simply stopped thinking, the conversation shifted instantly into a goat-riding duel!

"Go, Tempest! Goat Rider J-u-u-u-ump!" Vold shouted. Without waiting for a reply, he manipulated the reins in a single, sweeping motion! The giant goat, carrying Vold, kicked off the earth and soared high into the air! "I won't let you escape!" Among the members of Climb Genesis who were nearby, a few hot-blooded riders yanked their reins and performed the same jump!

"—Wait! Stop!" But Larken's attempt to restrain them was already too late! The goat riders who followed Vold also soared high into the sky—but their peak was nowhere near his! "How naive!" With a sharp cry, Vold's giant goat, Tempest, used one of the pursuing goats as a stepping stone to change its trajectory and fly even higher!

He landed directly on the roof of a private house and looked down upon the gathered crowd! "I shall withdraw for today, but listen well, Climb Genesis! Your ambitions will surely be crushed by my hand one day! Yah!" With a flick of the reins, the giant goat leaped from rooftop to rooftop, heading toward the mountain slope that pressed against the village.

They leaped from one rock face to the next, and in the blink of an eye, they sped up the rocky mountain and vanished. All that remained were the members of "Climb Genesis" and I, left staring up in blank amazement. ——And so. "Well then, I suppose I'll leave the rest to all of you, the parties actually involved," I said, as I spun on my heel to leave the area behind——

"Lina-san, was it?" Those were Larken's words, catching me right there. While making sure not to meet his eyes, I replied, "Hahaha. Don't mind me." "A traveling mage who uses offensive spells would surely have some skill with their arms, I imagine." "No? Nothing of the sort, I assure you!"

As I walked away with quick, scurrying steps, Larken's black goat pulled up alongside me. "Nope." "I believe you understand the circumstances. Won't you lend us a hand in capturing Vold and retrieving what must be returned?"

"Whether we have a mage or not makes a huge difference in the range of methods we can take." "Of course, I'll be sure to pay the commission fee properly." "That's why I'm saying no." "I see. Even after being called a villain and a scoundrel, and having an offensive spell blasted at me, I still cannot count on your cooperation?" If he was going to put it like *that*... I was weak.

I reflexively stopped in my tracks. "If I hadn't dodged that just now, I might have died. That attack was just..." "I see... Well... for now, let's at least hear the detailed story..." My heart wasn't in it, but that was how I answered. And so—— I ended up heading off to chase Vold alongside Climb Genesis!

(Goat Riders: To be continued!)

Next Time Preview Through a strange turn of events, Lina ended up having to lend a hand to Climb Genesis! On a rocky mountain with poor footing, would they really be able to corner Vold?!

Could they safely reclaim the stolen head-gear item?! And why the heck are goats' eyes split horizontally?! I was a little put off when I first saw them! Anyway, next time: "Goat Riders" Conclusion! Wait for it while wondering about the difference between L and R and becoming a lover (koibito) or rubber (gomu)!

[Goat Riders Part 2]

[Synopsis] The man Lina encountered on the mountain path was Vold, a "Goat Rider" wearing an ill-fitting wig and riding a giant goat! According to his story, a group of villains calling themselves "Climb Genesis" were running rampant in the area, and he claimed to be wearing the wig left behind by a friend while fighting that organization every day!

As they went along, the two were ambushed by members of "Crime Genesis" and their leader, Larken! Lina reflexively fired an offensive spell, providing cover for Vold! However, upon listening closely to the story, it turned out that "Mountain Climbing Genesis" (Climb Genesis) was actually a mutual aid union for goat riders!

They claimed that Vold had stolen Larken's wig and was harassing them because he opposed the formation of the union! And so, through the flow of events, Lina took on the task of reclaiming the stolen wig!

That shack stood quietly, surrounded by a cluster of towering rocks. The surrounding ground looked like a forest of stones, with jagged crags and giant boulders of all shapes and sizes jutting out and overlapping one another. Here and there, the ground was visible, and depending on the spot, grass grew——

In one such spot where the ground was visible sat a crude, hand-built shack. It was just large enough for a few people to rest in. Beside it was a makeshift fence, and inside the fence, a single large goat lay curled up, fast asleep. The goat's name was Tempest. And this quietly standing shack was one of Vold's bases, where he was exploring new forms of mountain transportation.

Now. Having obtained information that Vold was here, the members of Climb Genesis—ten people in total—and I deployed behind the nearby rocks, surrounding the shack.

By the way, since I couldn't handle a giant goat, I was riding on the back of the large goat that the leader, Larken, was on. Our objective, of course, was to reclaim Larken's wig, which had been stolen by Vold! .....Well, anyway.

Although I had accepted the request due to the way things turned out, to be honest, I didn't care about their clashing ideologies or whose wig it was. I just wanted to get this over with quickly—but the reason I was asked was solely to help Larken and the others. ...If I had been acting alone, I could have just blown away the shack and the whole side of the mountain with an offensive spell and finished it in an instant, but I had made an effort to restrain myself.

Seeing that the encirclement by the Climb Genesis members was complete, Larken gave the signal with a silent hand gesture! The goat riders had wrapped fur around the hooves of their giant goats to dampen the sound of their footsteps, and they began their approach toward the shack!

That was the plan Larken had devised. The basic policy wasn't bad: close the distance quietly, then launch a sudden raid to suppress Vold before he had a chance to mount his goat and take back the wig.

Vold's skill as a goat rider was top-tier. I had seen for myself the sharp technique he displayed when riding his beloved goat, Tempest. But conversely, if he wasn't on a goat, he was just an ordinary person. Or so it should have been.

Inside the fence next to the shack, Vold’s goat, Tempest, was still asleep. The goat riders moved forward.

——A sense of unease ran down my spine. Something was wrong. But faster than I could put that into words, Larken shouted! "Go!" At the same time Larken raised his voice, he manipulated the reins!

The large goat carrying the two of us kicked off the earth and leaped onto the top of the rock where we had been hiding! Looking down, his comrades were rushing toward Vold’s shack!

Several giant goats kicked the earth with great force, leaping into the space between the shack and Tempest to block the path. At the same time, members from other directions rushed toward the shack!

But at that moment, Tempest, who had looked like he was sleeping until just a second ago, stood up straight, kicked the ground, and leaped! Larken and I raised our voices almost simultaneously! "This is bad!" "Get back!" But by then, Tempest, who had leaped high into the air, kicked off one of the rock faces to jump even higher.

He leaped toward the rock face where we were. Just as he did, the rock wall Tempest kicked swung and wobbled—— *Rumble, rumble, crash!*

It shook and collapsed, becoming a landslide that cascaded down toward the shack below! Larken’s voice was a split second too late to warn his members who had noticed the anomaly!

A cacophony of screams and goats' cries filled the air! As the various jumbled sounds subsided and only the echoes remained... "Climb Genesis! I've seen right through your scheme!" The voice that rang out loudly was none other than Vold's!

"What?!" Along with Larken’s cry of shock, everyone’s gaze shot upward! There, having leaped up and standing on the rocky high ground, looking down at us with a small movement of its feet——was none other than the goat rider Vold, who had raised himself up!

Already on his head was the wig he had stolen from Larken, perfectly fitted in a black seven-three side part that floated there so painfully! But surely, by the amount of that painfulness, Larken’s heart must have been bleeding as well!

"You! How did you get in a place like that!?" The one who answered Larken’s shout was me. "I was there from the beginning." I had intended to corner him, but in reality, I was the one who had been led into a trap. Vold was hiding in that very spot.

Come to think of it, that was the true nature of the sense of discomfort I had felt earlier. Normally, a Tempest—a goat with a strong sense of caution—would never fall into a deep sleep, completely unaware of someone's approach, even if they were moving as silently as possible.

"The goat jumping was the signal for us to charge into the shack; we'd rigged the rocky mountain to collapse easily, intending to catch the whole group in one fell swoop." That plan had been a near-complete success.

Among those who charged in, several had received a painful blow from either the riders or the goats. As Vold's gaze turned toward me, his expression was dyed with the color of surprise. "You're... Lina-kun, I believe?" "Ah, yeah. Well, a lot happened, and I ended up on this side."

As I scratched my head and spoke casually, Vold, still astride his Tempest, looked at me with eyes full of sorrow. "I see... Have you been brainwashed...?" "I haven't! What kind of ridiculous thing is that to say!?" "Because you're with Larken’s g—" Just as I was about to blurt out the word "gang," I was overwhelmed by the black murderous intent that erupted from Larken’s entire body, and I swallowed the word.

"...Z-zu... It's just that I was asked to take back the personal property you stole quite a while ago!" When I made that excuse, the murderous intent subsided in the blink of an eye. I breathed a sigh of relief inwardly and continued, "...or so says Vold." "I don't mind you rebelling against Climb Genesis, but stealing people's things... that's just not right." "So that makes you the villain," I said, thinking it might be futile, but attempting to persuade him nonetheless. "...I see..." Vold crossed his arms with a thoughtful look.

"Indeed, it's possible I've been misunderstood as being wicked." No, it’s not a misunderstanding; it’s a fact that stealing things is wrong. However, if I were to point that out here, the other person would only react defensively.

I decided to wait and see. Vold opened his eyes wide and shouted, "But! I cannot bend justice for fear of being misunderstood!"

"No, even if it's a misunderstanding, it's not justice!" I was a fool for hoping for a moment that reason might prevail.

"Stealing people's things is definitely a bad thing!"

"It is exactly as you say! However! This wig is an indispensable item for waking up my former friend Larken, who has run down the path of evil! If not returning this is considered evil, then I will gladly accept that infamy!"

"Shut up! You're just saying whatever you want because you think I'll just sit here and listen!" Larken, finally losing his patience, raised his voice in anger. He glared up at Vold—the hood he wore deep over his eyes nearly slipped off, and as he hurriedly held it down with his hand...

"Aren't you just one-sidedly labeling us as villains to cover up your own misdeeds! What you are doing, Larken, has nothing more than petty harassment against me!" "Say whatever you want! Larken! For today, I shall withdraw, but I will continue to fight until you open your eyes! Let's go, Tempest!" Having said that, Vold turned his large goat around by the reins.

"Don't think you're getting away!" Larken shouted, maneuvering his reins. "I'll take the sky!" I declared, jumping off the goat onto the rocky mountain and beginning to chant a spell. "I'm counting on you! Everyone, after him!" By the time he barked the order, the goat carrying Larken had already leapt down the rocks and was in pursuit of Vold.

I finished my incantation. "Levitation!" I floated softly into the air. To fire an attack spell, there were too many rocks here that acted as obstacles. My role, as requested, was strictly support.

If that were the case, the most appropriate thing to do was to look around from above and act as everyone's eyes. From a high vantage point, I could see a forest of rocks standing in a row across the entire area. This would make it impossible to see the opponent's figure clearly from the chasing members.

Although Vold appeared to be running between the rocks instead of on top of them, I couldn't see him directly from my position either—"Wait, there!" I caught a glimpse of a faint cloud of dust rising as he moved away from the shack.

"He's heading northeast!" In response to my raised voice, the members of Climb Genesis steered their goats and ran between the standing rocks. "He turned a little to the left! Ah, he's back on the original course!" I continued to give instructions as they moved forward. Before long, "—Stop!" It was Larken’s voice that echoed through the rocky area.

...What happened? Before I knew it, Larken, riding his large goat, galloped up onto a rock. In his left hand, he gripped a large object that resembled the tip of a broom. He held it out, and I saw a rabbit tied to it, running in place. At that moment, I realized clearly: Vold was probably in a completely different place by now.

With this method, we would never be able to beat Vold—I was certain of it.
"Honestly... this is quite a pain," Larken said, sitting across the table from me. We had come to a nameless village in a mountain valley after letting Vold escape and finishing emergency treatment for the injured people and goats.

Using Climb Genesis funds, we rented out a small inn, where the injured rested in their rooms while everyone else was treated to food and drinks. Even though it was a "consolation" party, the mood was a bit lackluster since Vold had gotten away.

"If I just had to defeat Vold by myself, I could blow him away with a flashy attack spell from a distance, and that would be that. But since the goal is to take back the item, that's not an option. Besides, if my allies are nearby, there's a risk of caught them in the blast, so I can't use anything too powerful." Larken glared at me from under his hood, as if to say we were just getting in his way.

"I'm not saying that. I'm saying you need to rethink your approach. If you keep fighting in places that are advantageous to Vold, like today, your losses will only grow." Here, the visibility was poor due to many obstacles, and while the other side was a lone

rider, we were a large group. In this situation, numerical superiority couldn't be used, and even my support as a mage was ineffective.

I took a sip of the apple juice I was served and leaned over the table, whispering so only Larken could hear. "To be honest... if you think about the expenses, wouldn't it be much cheaper to just buy a new wig instead of obsessing over the stolen one?"

Of course, "the thing" was nothing other than the wig. I didn't know how much it cost to make one wig—but Larken had hired me, mobilized all these people, treated the injured, and rented out an entire inn to provide food and drinks for everyone.

I didn't think the total cost of all that was cheaper than the wig. Larken leaned forward and lowered his voice. "It's not just a matter of the amount of money. It's a matter of the organization's trust." "You mean... pride?" "No. It's a matter of the organization's reliability.

I approached the goat riders in this area and formed Climb Genesis like this, but there are still many goat riders who don't think well of belonging to an organization and have refused to join.

Those guys don't come at us with direct harassment, though. But, in a situation like this, if we can't even take back what Vold stole, or if people start thinking that a single hired mage could solve everything alone, the organization would lose its meaning. Don't you think many people would start feeling that way?" "—I see."

If that happened, it would be difficult to keep the organization's activities on track. "But if that's the case, it's bad if you don't settle things quickly with a single opponent like that." "Of course I know that... but it's not like there's some clever trick..." he said with a sigh.

"There is one," I said without hesitation. Morning came to the misty mountain village. I heard the bells attached to their necks ringing as about twenty large goats lined up. On both sides of their torsos, slightly large boxes were loaded, each stamped with the mark of the "Mountaineering New Life Association (Climb Genesis)."

Larken blew his horn, and the goat riders' attention gathered. "Are the goats in good spirits!?" "Oh!" the men responded to Larken’s shout. He sat astride his goat, which was the only one not carrying any boxes. He looked around at everyone and made an announcement.

"—This time, we will take the route through Snake Peak, cross Mt. Kultos and Mt. Melu, and deliver the cargo to the town of Latatos! The estimated time is two days!

While being careful of the goats and the luggage, do it surely, swiftly, and politely!" Larken spoke those words. I stood at his side.

He changed the tone of his voice slightly and continued, "...Recently, there may be some who are troubled by the fact that someone has been snubbing our Climb Genesis and performing acts of harassment.

Even during this job, there may be interference. However! I want you to be at ease! As a guard, I have hired a mage like this!" and pointed at me.

"What we must do is simply steady work! Your opponent is not the person trying to compete with us, but the customer and the work itself! Each step built upon another is what builds trust— that's the only way! —I expect good work." "Oh!" came the men's voices again. I climbed onto the back of Larken's goat— " Let's move out!"

Following his signal, the group made their way into the pathless rocky mountains. After walking for a while, the sky cleared up, and we could see far into the distance.

If I were to describe it in words, it was still a rocky mountain, but it looked quite different from where Vold's hut had been. Here, the rocky surface turned into a slope that stretched on forever, with scruffy weeds and moss growing here and there. The visibility was good, and there were few places to hide. I wondered how much further we would continue through such a place.

"Now then—" In the middle of the line that was moving in single file, Larken spoke in a voice that only I, sitting behind him and handling the goat's reins, could hear.

"Do you think they'll come?"

"Yeah," I answered without hesitation. There was no need to ask who "they" were. Vold and his goat, Tempest. If Crime Genesis achieved results in their work, it would lead to the organization's credibility. But from Vold's perspective, that was not something to be welcomed.

If that were the case, they would definitely come to interfere—that was how I read the situation, but— "I mean, they're already here." "What...?" Even as I raised a voice of confusion, I made sure not to panic and look around.

"They've been following us since a little while ago. I don't know the opponent's exact position, but I've been sensing a clear hostility directed this way since the moment we departed. There are too many people around, so I can't pin down the precise location.

...Just look straight ahead. See that place where the right side becomes a steep cliff and juts out?" "I see it. I'll start the preparations for an intercept around there." "Understood. I'm counting on you." "Roger that."

I began chanting a spell in response. Larken didn't give any kind of signal—the column continued forward as before—and just as the lead reached the spot in question! On top of the cliff that towered to the right, there was a dry clatter, and a single stone tumbled down. As it rolled, it caught other stones and soil, turning into a massive landslide that was supposed to strike the passing column.

However, that was only if I hadn't been there. "Ice Arrow!" I released the spell I had been chanting in advance at the same moment the stones began to roll! The freezing magic closed the stones in ice before the landslide could happen, pinning them to the cliff and preventing the collapse before it even started!

At the same moment. "He's here!" At Larken's shouted signal, everyone changed their formation at once. They didn't deploy; they gathered in a spot away from the cliff. "Vold! I know you're there!" While hearing Larken's call, I chanted the next spell and leapt from the goat— "Wing Cloak!"

Wrapping myself in a barrier of wind, I used a high-speed flight spell to soar into the air! It was a difficult spell to control, but here the field of vision was open and there were few obstacles! I saw him! Near where the stones had just crumbled away, I saw the figure of a man straddling a goat! It was Vold and his goat, Tempest, wearing a wig!

I circled around just like that, deactivated the spell at a position that blocked the path of retreat, and landed on the rocky ground.

Whether he realized that hiding was useless or if he never intended to hide from the start, Vold handled his goat and moved to a position where he could be seen by the group below, first looking down at us—then glaring at Larken. Larken looked back at him and raised his voice in a clear, ringing tone.

"I know what you're up to, Crime Genesis!" "To take cargo from innocent people who know nothing and transport it to earn money! You intend to expand the organization's power that way!"
"Exactly!" Larken also raised his voice and shouted back,
"I mean, that's just normal business! Don't make it sound like something evil!"
However, Vold didn't think so.
"Don't make me laugh!" "Crime Genesis, who corrupts goat riders, is wrong! In other words, evil! If you ask me, things like your claimed individual skill-based work only

hinder the development of goat riders and lack stability; they are nothing more than things that block the growth of newcomers!"

"You're the evil one!" Larken shot back, refusing to lose. Of course, there was no right answer to this argument. Whether it was better to do things as an individual or as a group depended on the content of the request and the situation; the merits and demerits were simply different.

The only thing that could be said for certain was the one who had run wild was Vold by believing his own side was right.

"Did you drop your heart into the darkness before you could even be called 'evil'! Larken!" Enraged, Vold gripped Tempest's reins tightly.

"If my words won't reach your heart, I have no choice but to correct your mistakes with strength! Go, Tempest! Hyaa!" He roared and charged down the cliff toward the Crime Genesis group spread out below! But that movement was exactly as calculated!

I activated the spell I had already been chanting once more and flew after Vold! Vold didn't kill the momentum of his descent and charged straight toward the Crime Genesis group!

For goats loaded with cargo, it would be impossible to respond to that speed! Vold probably thought that the only one who could oppose him was the unburdened Larken! But! Just as he was about to plunge into the group! "Now!"

In response to Larken's ringing voice, the Crime Genesis goat riders pulled the hidden strings all at once! The mechanism activated, and the cargo boxes loaded on their left and right sides disintegrated instantly! From within— *Sshaaaaa!* With a sound, a massive amount of sand spilled out! "Whaaaaaat!?" By the time he raised a cry of shock, Vold was already plunging into the rocky area covered in sand! Tempest's hooves were caught in the sand and slipped!

Once he was at that speed, there was no way to handle it! He crumbled and tumbled over! As I caught up, I deactivated the spell near Larken and landed.

"No... way..." Surrounded by the members of Crime Genesis, Vold remained fallen and groaned quietly. His left hand still held Tempest's reins, while his right hand held down the wig he was wearing.

"...I did think that the timing for a large cargo transport job was a bit too convenient. I thought it might be a lie to lure me out..." Exactly. It was all a trap to lure Vold onto this stage. I had judged that even if he noticed the possibility, Vold wouldn't be able

to resist taking the bait. Because if the transport job were real, the organization's reputation would go up.

"But... I didn't read that the contents of the boxes were sand..." Tempest and Vold managed to pick themselves up, but they couldn't possibly be unhurt after tumbling at that speed. I couldn't tell just by looking how much pain they were in, but they weren't moving like they usually did. "The match is decided."

As he spoke, Larken stepped out in front of Vold. He was being careful to ensure their own goats didn't lose their footing in the sand they had scattered. "I'll have you return what you should return." Vold also looked at Tempest; a flame of fighting spirit was still lit in the depths of his eyes, refusing to die out.

"It's... not over yet..." He faced him while handling the reins—but Tempest's footing was no longer as steady as before. "To this extent... Tempest's heart won't break!" "A great spirit, but it's useless. All that's left is to follow my plan and have everyone beat Vold up and take back the wig. But."

"If you're going to go that far—" Under the hood, a fighting spirit also lit up in Larken's eyes. "I'll settle this one-on-one with you." "Wait, what!?" I reflexively raised my voice at the proposal that wasn't in the script, but Larken silenced me with a sharp look.

"That part is a handicap. Therefore, if I win, back off—but I won't tell you to return what you've already taken. I simply can't make a promise that would change everyone's livelihood based on my own stubbornness.

However—I will challenge you as one fellow goat-rider to another, and we will settle this purely." To Vold's declaration, Larken smiled audaciously and said, "...If you're giving me a handicap, then you're the one who's gone soft from desk work. You don't really think you can win."

"I have no intention of neglecting my training, even if I've left the front lines. It is you who shouldn't underestimate me." Larken returned a thin smile. The members of Climb Genesis standing around them naturally stepped back, clearing the field for the two combatants.

Up on the rocky ground, the sand scattered earlier still remained.

If one misread the handling of the reins, it would change the course of the battle. A dry wind blew across the rocky mountain, kicking up the surrounding sand—Larken and Vold handled their reins simultaneously!

Two shadows kicked off the earth and raced—*Gat!* The moment they crossed paths, there was the sound of an impact. They passed each other and stopped their movements.

"……Ugh……" A pained groan belonged to Larken. To me, it was clearly visible. At the moment they passed each other, Larken had dodged the strike from Tempest's foreleg by a paper's breadth—and in that exchange, Vold's right fist had sunk in.

This was a scene from a traditional ballad; Vold would flash a small smile here before falling flat on his face— "……It's my win, I suppose……" While handling the reins and making Tempest turn his head, Vold spoke. Certainly, in that instant, Larken had not dealt any pain to Vold.

"……Heh…… fufu……" Mixing a laugh into his groan of pain, Larken also turned his goat to face Vold again. "Is that so?" Larken said with a fearless smile, raising his left hand—and in one motion, he flipped back the deep hood he was wearing! What appeared from under the hood was a skin tone that gleamed in the morning light! Around his head, some hair still remained, but— "What in the—" Vold's words froze as he started to speak. Following that, Larken held up a thick black lump in his raised right hand!

"Equip!" Along with the shout, Larken placed it on top of his head and adjusted its shape slightly— "Fu…… fuhahahahaha! It's back! It's back, ohhh!" The one who let out a roar of joy was Larken, wearing a jet-black seven-three side-parted wig! Yes! His goal, from the very beginning, had not been to defeat Vold!

For him, victory meant reclaiming the stolen wig at all costs! Realizing this too late, Vold's face was dark with regret. "……Damn it……! I messed up…… So this makes Larken complete……!" I considered interjecting, but Larken, now wearing his wig, was certainly wrapped in a confidence and ambition incomparable to when he was hooded.

Even his voice, which should have been the same as before, was somehow filled with a mysterious dignity. "It's your loss, Vold." "Not yet—" "It's my loss." Larken cut off Vold's attempt to argue sharply.

"Haven't you noticed? Your mount, Tempest, has injured his leg." Vold's expression changed at the remark. Now that it was pointed out—even to my eyes, not being well-versed in goats—Tempest's stance looked somewhat unnatural.

"He's hiding it bravely…… but I noticed with that last blow. If he hadn't, I would have been kicked down and defeated without ever getting my wig back. My hostility toward

you guys took precedence, and I overlooked my beloved goat’s condition—it's a disgrace as a goat-rider."

"Tempest, you—" Vold hurriedly jumped down from his back, and at the same time, his giant goat, Tempest, buckled his knees as if his strength had given out. "Tempest!" To his panicked master, the large goat didn't even bleat, but simply stared back.

"……Forgive me. I’ve ended up making you go along with my selfishness……" "—If Tempest is like that, you won't be able to do any transport work anymore." Handling his goat, Larken slowly approached and spoke.

"If you don't have savings, you won't even be able to afford treatment for the goat's injury." Vold stopped his goat beside him, and Larken reached out his right hand. "However, if our 'Mountain-Climbing New Life Association' is involved, we can arrange for the goat's treatment and a temporary job for the duration." For a while, Vold directed a gaze at that right hand as if he were looking at something unbelievable—

"……It’s my loss. Completely." He gave a bitter smile and took that hand. "I’ve been in your debt." The incident was settled, and I returned to Kata Village. I received my reward. At the moment of parting, Larken surely wouldn't bow to me.

I shrugged my shoulders, thinking that something was bound to go wrong. "……I only set the stage halfway. You were the one who managed it in the end." "Even so, if things had gone as I planned and everyone had just beaten Vold up, you never would have gotten your wig back, and Vold wouldn't have made peace with Larken and joined Climb Genesis." But Larken shook his head.

"No. Even so, if it wasn't for the plan you wrote, it wouldn't have turned out like this. At the very least, let me say thank you."

I shrugged my shoulders again. "Well, fine. But it turned out to be quite an expensive outing for you, didn't it?"

"Not at all. For that part, I'll work Vold like a dog from now on and get my money's worth. Hahahaha!" The depths of his eyes as he spoke weren't laughing at all. Those were—truly serious eyes. ……That said, no matter what kind of hardships Vold would face in the future, it was none of my business. —Well, good luck, Vold. I muttered a half-hearted encouragement in my mind. I set my sights on the next town and hit the road—

(Goat Riders: Finished)

Things Lurking Among the Trees [Part 1]

It was winter, the season when warm food tasted best. I thought it was just as good to eat indoors as it was to walk while huffing and puffing on hot food bought at a storefront in the cold wind.

I was in the town of Ougree, taking a bite of a steaming bun with hot steam rising from it—a local specialty. "Cut it out already!" Faster than my scream, a flash of silver light grazed the tip of my nose!

"Huh—!?" I leaped backward instantly—the strike seemed to have directly hit the steamed bun, and the warmth vanished from my hand. There was no murderous intent, which meant my opponent was quite skilled. When I took my distance and looked, a man was standing there. He looked to be a little over twenty years old, dressed like a common townsman, with a handsome face and silver hair as cold as ice. In his right hand, he held several silver metal rods, one of which must have been the one he threw.

At the edge of my vision, I saw the miserable sight of the steamed bun I had just been eating, now skewered to the wall of a nearby house. Its pure white skin was torn, and the filling—a blend of meat and vegetables—was spilling out.

"……You……!" I ground my teeth and glared at the man. As a warrior and a genius sorceress, I, Lina Inverse, had no shortage of people targeting me to make a name for themselves or out of some grudge. I was fine with them challenging me to a fight, but— "What did that steamed bun ever do to you!" I roared at the man.

At my voice, the people around us finally noticed the abnormality and began to murmur. "I don't know if you were aiming for me or not! But I won't forgive you for involving an innocent food item in a stupid fight!" To me, as I burned with flames of rage in my eyes, the man somehow tucked the metal rods behind his waist and said, "Don't get the wrong idea."

"The wrong idea? You suddenly attack a person, how is that a misunderstanding?"
"That's the misunderstanding. I wasn't aiming for you. I was aiming for that," he said, pointing to the steamed bun that had been skewered by his attack.
"……What do you mean……?"
"Exactly what I said!" The man raised his eyebrows at me as I questioned him and suddenly shouted,

"The shop where you bought that should have had a sign like this! 'Ougree Specialty: Dream Cotton Cap'!"
"……It certainly said that……" I replied. Of course, "Dream Cotton Cap" was the embarrassingly poetic name of the steamed bun. A short while ago, while I was on my journey, I heard rumors in a certain village about the steamed buns here.

They said it contained a variety of meats and vegetables and was incredibly juicy. So, I had stopped by this town specifically for those buns, but—
"What about it?" When I asked, the man pointed sharply at the skewered bun and said, "That is NOT a 'Dream Cotton Cap'!"

He raised his voice loudly. "Idiots who have fallen for commercialism eat such fake things and think they are the specialties of Ougree! It's a huge nuisance! I'm just stopping travelers like you from eating those fakes!"

We were in the middle of a town street. There were passersby, and the shop where I bought the bun was nearby. Naturally, the auntie at the shop had her face twitching slightly at being called a fraud.

"I can't just let that slide," said a voice. Two men with hostile gazes walked toward us, looking rather thuggish. "You've got a lot of nerve calling the town's specialty a fake. Who the hell do you think you are? Huh?" They closed in on us. The silver-haired man gave a relaxed smile and said, "Whitey's lackeys, I see. It seems you don't know who I am—" He glared at the two men with a sharp look.

"I'm afraid of fights, so please forgive me!" It was a pathetic line for someone who had just acted like a lion. The gap caused his opponents to freeze for a moment. "—This way!" Faster than I could process what was happening, the silver-haired man turned on his heel, grabbed my hand, and ran.

"Wait—what!?" I didn't know why, but I found myself being dragged along. "Don't involve me in your—!" I started to say, but the man cut me off.
"Just follow me! I'll show you what a *real* 'Dream Cotton Cap' tastes like!" We ran through a street corner for about three minutes from the original location, and the silver-haired man collapsed. He sat slumped on the roadside, gasping for breath.

"……Huff…… huff…… wheeze…… not much of a…… mouth…… huff……" I looked down at the man and said, without even being out of breath myself, "……How little stamina do you have? You." The two men didn't seem to be following us. It was more likely they didn't bother chasing us because they thought it was too stupid than that we had lost them. "……It's…… not…… huff…… stamina…… it's…… huff…… technical skill…… gfu……"

"Gueh!" He began coughing violently while breathing like a terminally ill patient. For a moment, I seriously thought he might die right there. "Get it together. You're going to let me eat that delicious steamed bun, right?" I said half-heartedly.

"It's NOT…… a steamed bun! It's the 'Dream Cotton Cap'! Geff! Gofuff!" He shouted in a rage and started coughing again. "Fine, fine. Just rest." I had followed him because of his words about it being truly delicious, but I wondered if I could really trust this person. Still, as I watched him for a while, his breathing eventually evened out.

I judged it was about time and spoke up. "I'm Lina. As you can see, I'm a traveling sorceress—I didn't hear it earlier, but who are you?" While still slightly out of breath, the man began to speak. "……My name is…… Lett Remus…… the legitimate successor of the 'Dream Cotton Cap' vendor, Remus Bakery……"
"The vendor?"

"……So that means, by any chance, the thing they sell in town is a fake made by copying yours?" Lett corrected me immediately. "……It’s the 'Dream Cotton Cap'……"
For me, it was an embarrassing name I didn't want to say out loud, but—
"—is it a fake made by imitating that? Is that how it is?"
"……That's how it is."

It seemed he had recovered considerably; Lett stood up on the spot and said, "Those things can't be called the real 'Dream Cotton Cap'. Follow me. I'll show you the real thing." With those words, he began walking unsteadily—

"……What the heck is this!?" That was my first reaction. I was led to a small shop tucked away from the main street. Excluding Lett, there were only two staff members. There was a steamer, and the sign, to put it plainly, was quite drab, reading "Remus Bakery". To be honest, my first impression was that it didn't look like much, but I ordered this plain white bun handed to me at the storefront with half expectation and half doubt—

This. Was. Delicious. The pure white, fluffy exterior was a perfect match for the blend of various meats and vegetables inside! The filling was juicy without being watery at all!

If it were made poorly, the dough would be overwhelmed by the flavor or get soggy from the juices, but I didn't know what kind of secret technique was used; the dough stayed fluffy while perfectly sealing in and harmonizing with the juice of the filling. It was, how should I put it, a truly divine balance. After eating the whole thing in one go, I was dazed by its deliciousness for a while—and my first words were,

"This is…… the real 'Dream Cotton Cap'." At that reaction, Lett nodded with confidence. "Yeah! This! It's really delicious!" I raised my voice without even trying to hide my excitement. "I'm sorry for thinking it was an embarrassing name. This certainly deserves a name like 'Dream'." "I'll take another one! Another one! Of course, I'll pay for it!"

Lett gave a wry smile and said, "As long as you pay, you're a customer. Of course, I have no complaints." He took out another pure white bun from the steamer and said, "That will be two silver coins, please." "Pffft!" I accidentally spat out at the amount requested.

"That's expensive! The price is too high!" I shouted, but he replied flatly, "Is it? It's about the same as ordering a course meal at a decent restaurant." "That's exactly it! I'm saying that's too expensive for the price of *one* of these!" Incidentally, the price of the "fakes" Lett spoke of was two copper coins each. I wouldn't say it out loud because he'd get mad, but— "But I think it's a taste that matches the price." "……Well…… maybe so……" While grumbling, I took out two silver coins from my purse and handed them over. I took the "Dream Cotton Cap" and bit into it—

Before I knew it, I had finished that one too. "……Ah…… so happy……♡" I basked in the afterglow for a moment, then slowly took out two more silver coins and said, "One more, please!" At my order, Lett looked troubled and said, "……Customer, that's enough for today……" "Shut up! Just bring the next one!" Even when I said something that sounded like a mean-spirited drunk, he replied, "Actually, there aren't any left."

"……Eh? No more?" I knit my brows. "I saw several more white lumps in the steamer when you took that one out earlier—" But Lett shook his head. "I'm sorry. Those are all reserved." "Ehh!?" My voice cracked. Certainly, if I thought about that taste, even at a seemingly outrageous price, people who wanted it would want it.

There were likely limits to how many could be made as well. "...Hmm—as I thought, I just couldn't make that many." At my mutter, a dark light flickered in Rhett’s eyes. "Ah... that’s all because of that Whitey fellow..." Whitey? "I mentioned the name earlier, but he’s a business rival."

"A rival, I see." Not mine, but a rival for the 'Dream Cotton Cap.' That person wanted to spread the 'Dream Cotton Cap' even further to the general public. That was fine in itself. But the method they chose was mass production, which came with a decline in flavor. "I see..." I murmured. It was nearly impossible to prepare both high-quality ingredients and skilled cooks in large quantities. In mass production, quality degradation was inevitable to some extent.

"Mass-produced goods aren't necessarily bad. As a filled steamed bun, they aren't terrible. But they aren't worthy of the name 'Dream Cotton Cap.' It’s only natural to be angry when something with the exact same name but a vastly inferior taste is being sold."

"More than anything, what’s infuriating is that because those people are making that stuff, the ingredients are running low and our production volume has decreased." "Hard-to-get ingredients, huh."

Rhett nodded at my response and said, "Yeah. I can manage the other things, but for the filling, I absolutely need the nuts from the Foamto trees that grow around these mountains." The surrounding mountains were home to dangerous animals, and Whitey's group was also buying up the harvested nuts, which meant our share was inevitably decreasing.

"......Hmm..... wait, so—" "That nut, can you still harvest it in this season?" "Yeah. They bear nuts in autumn and don't fall until early spring—" "—Wait, do you mean?" I nodded at his question. "If there are plenty of those nuts, you can make lots of 'Dream Cotton Caps,' right? Then all you have to do is go pick them. I might not look it, but I’m a bit used to fighting. There's talk of dangerous animals, but I'll be fine."

"That's no big deal. Since I'll go and harvest a bunch of those nuts, how about you let me eat my fill of 'Dream Cotton Caps' in return?" "......Hmm....." Rhett crossed his arms for a moment at my proposal and thought it over. But it didn't take him long to reach a conclusion.

"I understand. If you're going that far, I’d like to ask you. I’d also love to be able to make and sell a lot more. I promise to give you a reward befitting the amount of nuts you bring. However, I’ll be coming along too, both to guide you and to help identify the nuts." "It's a deal, then!" The two of us nodded to each other. And so, we headed into the mountains to search for the nuts.

At this time of year, the mountain air was predictably cold. But that wasn't the problem. "......Whew—..... whew—..... let’s..... take a break..... whew—....."

We hadn't even gone very far up the mountain path. Saying that, Rhett crouched down at the base of a tree, his breathing shallow. I stood beside him. "Hey, now. What are you doing, making those sounds in a place like this? This is just the beginning... or rather, we haven't even started yet, have we?" "......That’s..... whew—..... true, but....." "......I see..... I get it....." Come to think of it, this person had absolutely no stamina.

"For now, if you just guide me and show me the actual nuts, I'll handle the rest. Hang in there until then." "......Un... derstood....." He muttered as he wobbled to his feet and began to move his legs again somehow.

If we kept going at this rate, the sun would likely set before we reached our destination. And more importantly. "Say, what do you plan to do if a dangerous animal shows up? I can handle a single one, but if they come in a pack and several of them target you, I won't be able to cover you completely. Even if you manage to run away a bit, you'll run out of breath and be caught... that could really happen."

I really didn't want a development where we found the target nuts but couldn't make the 'Dream Cotton Caps' because someone got injured. "......To be honest..... I hadn't thought about that part..... I'll just have to..... manage somehow....." Even as he said it would "manage somehow," Rhett asked while still forcing his legs to move.

"What kind of animals are they, anyway?" "Huh?" "If it's a wolf or something, we could manage by climbing a tree." "......I don't know....." I stopped in my tracks involuntarily at Rhett's answer. "You don't know.....? You must have heard rumors, at least!?" "Of course I have. Though it's not like every person who went there was attacked; it seems like those who were attacked were all unable to see their opponent, or so the rumor goes."

"They didn't see the opponent.....? What does that mean?" "......Who knows..... I only heard it through rumors..... Apparently, there are those who were injured..... but I don't know the details." "Whew—....." I gave a vague response.

Either the people who were attacked were incredibly careless—or the opponent was incredibly fast, or perhaps they were invisible or camouflaged. Otherwise— The truth was that the victims had seen their opponent but were keeping quiet for some reason.

"I don't know what's out there... but at the very least, let's pray we don't run into them. Our goal isn't to exterminate some mystery, but strictly to get the nuts." "Ah..... yeah....." While nodding vaguely, the look of fear in Rhett's eyes was unmistakable. Whether it was his passion for food or sheer stubbornness, he didn't suggest turning back. Some trees in the mountains had lost their leaves, but many were evergreen, and the visibility wasn't very good. There was always the possibility that something was lurking in the shadows of the dense shrubs.

We continued along the path for a little longer. "......It's around here..... We're heading off the path and into the thicket....." Rhett declared as he stopped. "It's not

along the road?" "If it were..... it would have been picked by someone long ago..... That’s how it goes. But—once we go off-path, the footing gets worse. So—"

"Understood. Then just crouch down a bit and stay still." Rhett furrowed his brows, he slightly bent his knees. I stepped behind him and— "Hup!—" I went around behind him and locked my arms under his! "—Wh-what are you—!?" Ignoring his flustered words, I activated a spell. "Levitation."

Holding Rhett as he was, I floated lightly into the air. "Woah, woah.....!" "Stay calm. As long as you don't struggle, you won't fall." As I spoke, I began to control the magic, moving through the trees at a low altitude. Just as the name suggested, this spell allowed for floating in mid-air. Moving was about the same as walking normally, but it required a fair amount of concentration, and it could carry a corresponding weight. Keeping a height slightly above the ground, I drifted up along the slope. Rhett remained hanging quietly.

"Does this spell have any meaning? We aren't high up, and it isn't fast." "What are you talking about? It’s way faster than walking and climbing, right? And it doesn't consume stamina." ".....That’s..... I suppose so....." At my explanation, he let out a murmur of agreement.

We were on a rough slope. If we walked normally, it would be a toss-up between whether Rhett would give out first or we’d move at a snail’s pace. Of course, both were out of the question, so I figured this was the best method of travel.

"I'll go at a steady pace, so let me know when you see some nuts around." "Understood. .....Still, being hung like this in an unnatural posture is quite tiring in its own way." "How little stamina do you have!? Ah. Well, of course, it’s much easier than walking yourself, though....."

As we talked about various things, we hadn't gone very far when. "—Wait! To the right!" Rhett’s excited voice echoed through the grove. "—Whoa—" I controlled the spell to stop our movement and turned my eyes to the right.

"Eh? Where?" On a tree with no leaves. Green moss clung to the tangled vines. I didn't see anything that looked like a nut— "There! On that single tree in front of the one tangled in vines! The left of the branches that split in two! The one slightly higher up!"

Following his gaze as I was told— ".....That..... drab little thing?" "Yeah." At my mutter, he gave a firm nod. A tree that had dropped its leaves. On its branch hung a single, lonely, small, round nut, like a walnut.

It seemed that was our target, the Foamto nut. It was in a fairly high place, but I was floating. I controlled the spell and approached the nut. While hanging from me, Rhett reached out and plucked the nut. He brought it to his face and sniffed it. "Yeah. No doubt about it." He held it out to me.

When I brought my nose close to sniff it, a scent that I wasn't sure whether to call fresh or grassy wafted faintly. It wasn't exactly what you'd call a "delicious" smell, but they probably used the insides after cracking the shell, just like a walnut.

"Alright. No mistake, then." "Okay!" I gave a spirited reply. And so, the full-scale nut harvesting began. "......This is quite a pain....." "If they could be gathered easily, they wouldn't be in short supply." Rhett said in a calm tone to me as I grumbled. Anyway, these nuts only grew two or three to a tree at most.

The trees themselves didn't grow in clusters either; they were scattered here and there, and the number of nuts we'd found so far hadn't even reached ten. Seeking the next nut, I drifted aimlessly around the area.

"……By the way, how many 'Dream Cotton Candy' can one of these nuts make?" "At most two, I'd say." "Ugh……" A groan escaped me involuntarily. In other words—to make enough "Dream Cotton Candy" for me to feel even eighty percent full, I would need at least fifty or so of these nuts. This was…… much more difficult than I had imagined! But if it was for that flavor!

"Lina-san. To the left." At Rhett's word, I shifted my gaze—and at that moment. *Rustle*…… What I heard was the faint rustling of leaves. The sound just now— "Lina-san?" "—Shh!" I hushed Rhett as he called out to me, and I searched for a presence in the surroundings. It wasn't the sound of the wind shaking the leaves.

Something was there. Something. My intuition rejected the possibility of it being a small animal like a rabbit. The presence lurking nearby was undoubtedly focused on us. I couldn't sense any bloodlust or animosity—but that was no guarantee that the opponent was harmless.

A moment of tension passed that felt both long and short. "……Nothing seems to be there, though……" Rhett whispered in a low voice. Certainly—even though I was paying close attention to the area, nothing moved, and the presence that had been there just a moment ago had vanished before I knew it.

"Was it just my imagination……?" "I hope so, but……" At any rate, it was better to be over-cautious— Just as I was about to say those words, a mysterious creature's voice echoed! "Ho—ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!" "Wh-! What is that voice!?" Rhett cried out in confusion.

"Calm down!" While the voice continued to echo, I gave Rhett instructions. "Pretend you didn't hear anything and just act like you're passing by!"
"—Wait……!? Wait a minute, Lina! —Wait!" Just as the ridiculous laughter stopped abruptly, a woman's voice called out in a panic.

When the nearby thicket of shrubs rustled, the person who appeared from within was—a woman around twenty years old. Long black hair, a black cloak, shoulder guards with spikes, a skull necklace! And an unnecessarily revealing outfit!

"……What is that……?" Stunned, Rhett muttered, but I answered faster than he could. "Hmph! I should have known!" The strange creature pointed a finger at me and shouted, "The creature over there is my greatest and strongest rival in life, Lina Inverse! The White Serpent Naga, that's me!" As a side note, I whispered a supplementary explanation into Rhett's ear.

"To put it simply—she's the person who stalks me." "—I see. You have it rough, too." "I can hear you! You there!"

Naga raised her eyebrows at the incredibly accurate explanation. "Who's a stalker!? Don't talk about people like they're weirdos!" No. Even in this season, anyone dressed like that would be called a weirdo, no matter how they looked at it.

Rhett seemed to agree. He looked like he wanted to say something, but sensing the awkward atmosphere, he remained silent. "—Anyway—to meet in a place like this is quite a coincidence. Lina Inverse." Naga flipped back her long black hair and said, "Could it be that you, too, are after the Foamto nuts?"

"—Wha……!?" I couldn't help but let out a cry of surprise at Naga's words. Why would she mention the Foamto nut!? The answer to the question I held appeared immediately.

"It truly is a coincidence. Rhett." The new woman's voice came from behind Naga. A woman and two men emerged from the shadows of the trees a short distance away. Judging by their clothes and atmosphere, the woman was the leader and the two men were her subordinates or something of the sort.

The woman appeared to be in her mid-twenties. She had silver hair and wore well-tailored, easy-to-move-in clothes. Judging by the fact that she called Rhett by name—they were likely acquaintances.

Or rather— "……Whitey……!" Hostility filled Rhett's voice. That was the name of the person who mass-produced the inferior versions of "Dream Cotton Candy." However, the woman—Whitey—floated a relaxed smile while brushing off Rhett's hostility.

"You could still call me 'Big Sister' like you used to, you know." "Who would!" Rhett flew into a rage at her teasing. "—Siblings—what?" I muttered, but I wasn't that surprised. Even excluding their hair color, the facial features of the two were very similar.

Looking closely, it was obvious they were blood relatives. "……We are certainly connected by blood……" Rhett spat out bitterly. "But…… the one who would do something to disgrace the name of 'Dream Cotton Candy' inherited from Father is no longer my sister." "To say I disgrace the name, how heartless," Whitey said grandly.

"Conventional methods that are high quality but low volume, selling only to a fixed set of preferred customers, will eventually cause 'Dream Cotton Candy' to disappear. That is why I…… in order to spread the true meaning of the famous confection to the world and make it eternal, am doing this.

Though the taste doesn't reach the original, I sell the minimum essential 'Dream Cotton Candy' at a low price in large quantities. This is so that more customers can know about this deliciousness." "You call that falling, but if you ask me, it's just your own self-satisfaction to only sell to a few regulars and the wealthy. That is not the attitude of someone who sells food."

"……What did you say……?" "—No. I don't intend to argue with you about that again now. More importantly. Why are you in a place like this……?" Rhett glared at Whitey with sharp eyes. Whitey let out a small, relaxed laugh and said, "I'd like to say that's my line—but in this situation, it’s obvious to both of us."

"You came to pick the Foamto nuts to use for 'Dream Cotton Candy'—didn't you? Well…… I can pretty much imagine how it went. Since Naga-san was following me as a guard, she probably got involved with Lina-san in some similar way, and Whitey's side joined up with her."

"Let's both take care and focus on gathering the nuts." Whitey turned on her heel to leave. "Wait!" Rhett called out to her back. "I won't let you do that……! Even if you get your hands on the Foamtot, you won't be able to make use of that flavor.

It's just a waste of a treasure! I can't let people like you have those precious nuts!" When he said that, Whitey looked back over her shoulder and turned a gaze toward us that seemed entirely uninterested.

"Even if you say that. This isn't your mountain anyway, is it?"

"That…… that may be true, but…… anyway! I won't hand them over!" "Lina-san! Come on! We're going to drive these guys away!" Rhett suddenly started saying reckless things!

"Hmph! Just what I wanted!" Receiving that, Naga took up a stance! "I don't particularly like using force, Whitey," Naga turned back as she spoke, and the man accompanying her also moved forward as if to protect her— "—Eh?" "Man, one person?" I whispered. I was stunned.

"I'd like to ask you something." "……Eh?" "The other one, when did he fall down……?" Naga and the others turned around all at once. There, one of the accompanying men was lying face down on the ground.

"—Wait!?" Whitey rushed over in a panic and shook his small body. "What happened!? Get a hold of yourself!" "……Ugh……" It seemed he had lost consciousness; the man groaned and held his head as he staggered to his feet.

"What on earth happened!?" "……Ah…… Whitey-san…… That…… I don't know what it was…… but I was hit on the back of the head……" "—Hey, Rhett." I controlled my magic, landed on the ground, and approached him to confirm.

"You—were saying it, weren't you. That there's a dangerous animal here that no one has ever seen, or something like that." "Ah…… yeah. I've only heard rumors, though." "And, Rhett. You and I were looking toward Whitey and the men the whole time. Did you see anyone—or anything—punch that man down?" "—No—" "Wait, Lina! What do you mean!?"

Naga raised a confused voice at our conversation. "Whatever it is. It's decided, isn't it?" I said, sharpening my senses and searching the surroundings for a presence

(Things Lurking Among the Trees: To be continued!)

Next Time Preview

A mysterious presence closes in on Lina and the others! Who is the opponent that struck down one of the men without even showing their shadow?!

Can the group escape this predicament!? will Lina successfully get her mouth on a "Dream Cotton Hat"?!

Actually, I realized after finishing the writing, but isn't this "Dream Cotton Hat" just a meat bun!? As the author, I wonder how that's going to go!? Anyway, next time: "The thing that lurks among the trees: Part Two!" Wait for it while eating a Deluxe Pizza Bun at a convenience store!

Things lurking among the trees [Part Two]

(Synopsis) Lina arrived in the town of Ogury, drawn by the name of the famous confection the "Dream Cotton Hat." What she encountered was a man named Lett Remus, who continued to protect the traditional, expensive, and delicious "Dream Cotton Hat" while lamenting the existence of a cheap, mass-produced versions that was now widespread.

After eating the traditional version and being moved by it, Lina headed into the mountains—where dangerous animals were said to reside—along with Lett to gather the necessary ingredient, Foamto nuts.

There, they were met by Whitey who is Lett's sister and the one responsible for the spread of the mass-produced version. Whitey's group had hired Naga as a bodyguard! Just as a sibling spat was on the verge of exploding, one of Whitey's hangers-on was knocked unconscious by something! Lina and the others finally realized they were facing off against something lurking among the trees—

The tips of the trees swayed and rustled, and the sense of a lurking presence grew thicker. However, no matter how much I looked around, the opponent was nowhere to be seen.

"Hey! What is the meaning of this, Naga!?" I shouted. "You hear it too, don't you, Naga! There's something in these mountains, something dangerous and unrecognizable!"

Naga didn't even look toward me as I raised my voice; she simply retorted. "I didn't hear anything!" "You just said you did!" At Naga's immediate reply, Whitey raised a voice of protest.

"When I requested a bodyguard, I’m pretty sure I explained the role properly, didn't I!?"

However, Naga puffed out her chest without a hint of shame, saying, "Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! That is exactly the thinking of an amateur, Whitey Remus! Categorizing information by importance and making choices is the most basic of basics! To me, the White Serpent Naga, the only truly important things are that I'll get all-you-can-eat steamed bread once the job is over and the amount of the commission fee!" "That's not something you should forget at the very beginning! It's important! The most important thing!"

Whitey raised her voice in a desperate protest, but of course, it didn't get through. "What is most important to you is different from what is most important to me!"

"—Or rather, Whitey," I called out to Whitey while still scanning the area, unable to help but feel distracted by the side-talk. "Did you not notice anything when you first saw Naga's outfit? Conversations don't seem like they're going to work on her..."

"What do you mean by that, Lina?" "Her outfit...?" Naga ignored my point, and Whitey looked Naga over once more before saying, "Ah!?"

Finally, she let out a cry of surprise. "Now that you mention it, she's quite stylish!?" "Not that, you idiot! Anyway, everyone! Don't let your guard down, because there is definitely something nearby!"

I raised my voice. To be honest—I hadn't been very concerned about the mention of "dangerous animals."

I figured they were at most wolves or bears, and I thought that if they tried to surprise me, I could just blast them with an attack spell and be done with it—but not being able to see the opponent was unexpected.

".....This..... it might be better to withdraw for now...?" "Ah Yes. Go home, go home." Lett gave a cold laugh at Whitey, who was stating a sound opinion.

"I suppose that's a good testament to the fact that your passion for food was only that much after all. I'm staying to continue the harvest." "So I'm asking you, Lett. Seriously. No, really, seriously." His legs were shaking uncontrollably, but the reason he still wouldn't try to run was likely out of stubbornness toward his sister or his obsession with food.

".....To be honest, I think it's better to go back for now, too," I said. If possible, I wanted to identify the opponent before retreating, even if it was just a temporary withdrawal, but protecting Lett, who had zero physical strength, would be difficult. But Lett—

"No! To run away in fear from an opponent you don't even recognize, when the Foamto nuts are right there, would be a disgrace to my name as a 'Dream Cotton Hat' craftsman! Whitey!

You should go back and keep making your shams while scratching your belly! I'm staying here and I'll keep gathering Foamto nuts until Lina-san falls over!"

I unintentionally winced at his declaration, but he nodded with a sincere look in his eyes. "Ah! As expected of a bodyguard, it would be scary if you fell and I was left alone!"

"......Well, in the event that something appears that can defeat me, there's no way you could hold your own, Lett. In that regard, it’s not an incorrect opinion, but... being told that makes me want to abandon you and go home with all my might..." "In that case! Do It!" Hearing Lett's determination, Whitey also raised his voice.

"I won't back down either! Even if I have to overcome ten thousand hardships, I will bring back more Foamto nuts than you and return home!" Lett and Whitey—the gazes of the two sparked! Their intensity was so great that even the trees seemed to tremble!

But while they were saying those things, two of Whitey's men were suddenly struck down! "—Wait, again!?"

I raised my voice, and as everyone's expressions finally changed to realize the situation, I was internally aghast. Whitey ran to the men's side.

"You guys! Get a hold of yourselves! What happened!?" She called out while shaking their bodies. I had been scanning the surroundings without pause even while joining the conversation just a moment ago.

Yet, in the mere instant I had looked away, two men had been taken down. The men seemed to have just been knocked unconscious; they regained consciousness as Whitey called to and shook them. While still clutching their heads, they grimaced and raised themselves up.

"What happened!?" "......All of a sudden....." "I was hit on the back of the head....." The answer was the same for Whitey's question.

"You were hit, you say? With a stone or something!?" I asked. If that were the case, it should have been considered that they weren't hit, but rather had something thrown at them—but the two men looked at each other and said,

"......I didn't actually see it, but..... I feel like it was something like a stick." "Ah..... like this..... a side-swipe, with a *thump*." "A side-swipe!?"

Hearing that, I became even more confused. Whitey examined the back of the men's heads. "Indeed, there are fragments of tree bark in their hair. Perhaps they were hit with a fallen tree branch or something."

That was impossible. In other words, something holding a long stick had jumped out from the shadows and struck them—no, without being seen by anyone—and then vanished.

I punched the men aside and they hid themselves again. As expected, this was impossible.

Even in this abnormal situation, Naga didn't flinch at all. "Hmph! Interesting! If you won't show yourself, then I'll just keep going until there's no place left to hide!" Naga said as she began to chant a spell—

"Wait a second! Naga! What do you think you're doing!?" My kick landed squarely on the back of Naga's head. I glared sternly at Naga, who was clutching her head with teary eyes.

"If you blow away all the trees in the area so they have nowhere to hide, what do you think will happen!?" A rustle came from the branches nearby. "Hmph! As expected of Lina! To see through my plan! But now that things have come to this, I can't worry about a little mountain damage!"

"Usually, yes. It's usually impossible to convince you, Naga, but this time is different. ...If you do that, you won't be able to eat the steamed bread that was promised as a reward."

At my words, Naga's entire body froze stiff. I didn't miss the chance to pile on. "I mean, those men are here to guard the trees and harvest the nut that makes the bread, right? If you knock down all the trees and they can't harvest any more nuts, you won't just lose your reward—they might even sue you for damages."

"Th-that... that is..." "If you don't like it, think of another way." —I tried to persuade her, but even I hadn't thought of an effective countermeasure.

No matter how much I observed, all I saw were mountain trees. Since I didn't know what the enemy was or even where they were, there was nothing I could do. If Naga hadn't spoken up first, I might have been the one blowing away the surrounding trees.

At that moment. (...Hmm?) Something floated into the back of my mind; it was something I had read in an old book. When I looked again, I saw two men and Whitey, and behind them at an angle was a single tree...

...stretching its branches toward them. This was a "try it and see" situation. I stepped out toward them.

"Sorry, you three, but I'm going to run a little experiment. Could you move just a bit to the front left? Ah, a little more. Yeah, right about there."

I lured Whitey and the others into position, chanted my spell—and with a deliberate motion, I pointed at the target and released the magic I had invoked! "Vibration Bullet (Damu Brass)!"

The single strike, meant to pulverize whatever it hit, traveled through the air exactly as aimed and lunged toward the trees behind the men!

And then! *Whoosh!* The tree branch bent and dodged the strike! —I knew it! After a split second of silence, the voices of everyone except me harmonized in a scream.

"Eeeeeeeeeehhhhhh!?" Well, I suppose everyone would be surprised. A tree branch had just dodged an attack spell. "This is probably... a Trent," I said casually to everyone. "A... Trent?" "You're wrong." Rhett narrowed his eyes and denied my words.

Why did I have to be attacked by something so trendy in the middle of these mountains? Well, it wasn't a very famous opponent. In short, it was a "Tree Monster." To put it simply, a moving tree.

"It’s not that we couldn’t see the enemy attacking us. We could see them, we just didn't realize they were the attackers! That's all there is to it."

As I explained, everyone’s faces turned pale and they looked around at the trees with revulsion. "Wa... wait! Are you saying those are man-eating plants!?" It was Whitey who kept her distance from the trees and cried out in fear.

"No. I don't think they eat people," I replied. To tell the truth, even according to the old books I’d read, these creatures called Trents weren't well understood.

They looked exactly like trees, but they could move somewhat freely like animals, and they communicated through creaking sounds or the rustling of leaves... or so it seemed.

The reason research hadn't progressed was simple: they were hard to find. It didn't mean there were few of them; it was just that they were indistinguishable from ordinary trees.

On top of that, there might actually be very few of them. Even for someone like me, this was the first time I had actually seen one.

Since I could just hit them with an attack spell, I figured they were opponents I could easily defeat.

The Trents were likely just repelling people who entered their territory. "Now that we know what they are, let's defeat them quickly. We still have to collect the Foamto nuts," Rhett said—at that moment. *Rustle... rustle rustle rustle!*

All the trees in the vicinity began to stir at once! "Wha!?" This time, my voice was included in the chorus of surprise. Two things became clear. First, they reacted to Rhett's words—which meant they could understand human speech. And second—"Wha—what is this place!?"

To Whitey's cry, I revealed the other thing I had realized. "This is probably... right in the middle of a Trent nest."

The trees stirred. The branches swayed. Which trees were Trents and which were just swaying trees? I couldn't even tell anymore.

The rustling arose from all around us, and I fell into the illusion that the entire mountain was filled with Trents. —No. This might not be an illusion, but reality. This situation was extremely bad.

"—For now, we have no choice but to retreat." "Wait!" Rhett called out to stop my leaking voice. "Even I have my pride as a 'Dream Cotton Hat' craftsman—"

"Do you want to be killed?" My words made Rhett's body freeze. "Trents shouldn't eat people, so until now, you've gotten away with just being punched aside. But I wonder if they'll let a human who blurted out 'let's defeat them quickly' go home alive."

The blood drained from Rhett's face all at once at my point.

".....Hmph. Well, if you're going to go that far, I understand. Let's head back. Immediately. Quickly!" Rhett said, his body trembling.

I turned toward Whitey. "Is that alright with you, too?" "I... I don't mind, but..." "Hmph. It can't be helped." Naga nodded as well.

"But will we be able to make it back safely...?" I looked at Whitey, who was voicing her anxiety, and gave a powerful nod. "Do your best."

"That's so cold! Like it's someone else's problem...!?" "Well, I'm not your guard, after all." I chanted a spell and grabbed Rhett from behind in a half-nelson.

"Levitation (Raywing)!" I floated up into the air with the spell that traverses the sky! This was the same method I used to get here. Once I reached a height where the Trents' hands—no, their branches—couldn't reach, I could surely make it back to town safely.

As for Naga... it would be impossible for her to carry Whitey and the two men through the sky alone, but...

Well, it wasn't really my concern. Just as I was about to increase altitude, I felt a bloodlust behind me!

"Ice Arrow (Icicle Lance)!" The moment I heard Naga's voice, I canceled my spell! Almost simultaneously with the start of my fall, a lance of cold air grazed the top of my head.

I landed on the ground with a thud and glared at Naga! "Hey, Naga! What do you think you're doing, attacking me out of the blue!?"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! That's my line, Lina Inverse! You were trying to run away by yourself, weren't you!?" "Now that it's come to this, we're all in the same boat! If we're running, we're all running together!"

...Ahhh... knowing Naga's personality, I figured this would happen. I turned a murderous gaze toward Naga, and she met it with one of her own.

"......Hmph. Fine... if you're going to try to get ahead of me, I won't hesitate to shoot you from behind." "Hmph. Just what I'd expect from Lina Inverse." The time we spent glaring at each other was but an instant.

The two of us simultaneously turned toward the path leading to the foot of the mountain.

"Now then, Naga, shall we...?" "Let's go, Lina." Chanting spells under our breath, Naga and I began to walk side by side.

Our pace gradually quickened from a fast walk to a trot, and then to a full sprint! We dashed across the pathless earth, keeping a close eye on the trees around us.

Zip! I heard a faint whistling sound, and a thick branch lunged toward my path!

"Too slow! Vibration Bullet (Damu Brass)!" The strike I unleashed pulverized the branch, and I dashed straight through the gap created by the shattered fragments!

Beside me, Naga was nimbly dodging the branches that pursued her.

Until a moment ago, we couldn't respond because we didn't know what the opponent was, but now that we knew they were Trents, there were plenty of ways to handle them! I began to chant my next spell—

"Freeze Arrow!" Naga released dozens of shafts of cold air, which froze the moving branches in our path and sealed their movements. I dodged the next branch and crushed the one after that with my own spell.

"All right! We can do this!" I felt a surge of confidence, but at that moment—

"......Haa... haa... wait up....." Faintly reaching my ears was the sound of Rhett's gasping voice from far behind me.

I realized with a shock that I had forgotten just how little stamina that man had! Even so, I wondered if it was even possible to be that exhausted just from running down a short slope.

When I looked back, I saw the sight of Rhett and Whity huddled together, both panting heavily.

.....Those two really were siblings. Rhett and Whity were flustered, unable to run away by themselves, and stood there with troubled expressions.

"Naga! Stop!" I called out to her, having no other choice. "—Eh?" At the sound of my voice, Naga stopped in her tracks and looked back

Thwack. In that instant, her head was struck by a Trent's branch and she was sent flying. She flipped over and stopped moving, but immediately, she sprang up and came dashing back toward us at full speed!

"Wait, Lina! What's with the sudden stop!" It seemed she had been knocked unconscious for a split second after being hit in the head, but this was Naga we were talking about. Her recovery speed was top-class among all living creatures!

"The client is at their limit! We can't just leave them, can we!?" When I said that, Naga finally realized the situation. ".....Can't be helped, then," she muttered, and we both ran back toward the others.

"Get a hold of yourselves!" At my scolding, Rhett and Whity looked our way.

".....Ma..... hyuu..... hi..... hyuu—" ".....Ku mo..... hi ha—..... ro hi—....." Their answers didn't even form words. "You guys have way too little stamina!" I shouted. If they had even a tenth of Naga's life force, they would at least be on par with average people.

"Hey, Lina! What are we going to do about this!?" As Naga ran back and asked me, I replied. "Since it's come to this, it's a pain, but we'll just have to clear a path steadily!"

"The location of the Trents and the reach of their branches are fixed, so we just have to create a spot where they can't reach us!"

Even as we spoke, the reason we were able to stand still and talk was that we were outside the attack range of the Trents.

"Hmph. I see! So we just have to take down only the opponents in the way! It's a hassle, but I guess we have no choice!"

Naga and I began chanting our spells once again. Our first target was the tree whose branches I had crushed earlier!

If we smashed the trunk itself, a wide path would open up! Soon, the incantation was complete— "Hyu-ya-me-ro-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-uuu.....!" Just before the spell was finished, a voice that sounded like it belonged to someone dying echoed out.

It was Rhett's voice! Had he been caught by a Trent!? Thinking the worst, I looked over, but he didn't seem to be in any particular danger.

Instead, he had slumped to the ground and was pointing somewhere with a trembling finger, his face twisted in a desperate expression. ".....That tree is..... Gefu-goh!" Rhett shouted, squeezing out the last of his strength.

The tree at the tip of his finger was the very one Naga and I were aiming for. ".....That's the tree where we picked the Foamto nuts.....!" —Eh!? Which meant.....

"Naga! Stop!" I called out to Naga to wait. ".....The Foamto nuts are..... probably the nuts that grow on Trents.....!" Rhett's voice echoed.

Various mysteries were solved then and there. The reason the Trents had attacked people wasn't because they had intruded on their territory, but because their own children—the nuts—had been stolen.

To the other people who had been attacked until now, it probably looked like they were trying to cut down the trees or harm them in some way.

However, even knowing that didn't necessarily change the situation. To break through this area, we needed to do something about the Trents.

But if we went around killing them, the amount of Foamto nuts that could be harvested this year and next would drastically decrease. There was no way Rhett and the others would want that.

(..... hmm?) I thought the mystery was solved, but then I noticed a contradiction. Or rather, I realized that what I had thought was a mistake. I just didn't know what that contradiction meant yet.

Then, a thought occurred to me. "—Naga! By any chance, can you speak Trent!?" At my question, Naga let out a loud, boastful laugh. "Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"There’s no way I could speak such a thing, Lina Inverse. Aren't you being an idiot? I mean, do you really think there’s such a thing as a 'Trent language'?"

Yippee! So annoying! I thought.

I had wondered if Naga, who could communicate with all sorts of strange things, might be able to do it, but as I expected, it was impossible.....

Just as I was thinking that, one of the Trents in front of us moved! It was supposed to be outside the attack range, but it moved one of its branches and started scratching and scribbling on the ground— After a moment, it returned the branch to its original position.

".....What? Was that just now?" "Who knows," I replied to Naga's murmur. It looked like it had been writing something on the ground, but I figured that was just Rhett’s delusion.

Of course, in a situation like this, there was no way a Trent would be doodling on the ground. Indeed, even looking at the ground in that area, all I saw was— "『Does any among you wish to speak with us?』" written there. .....

"It can write!!?" We all cried out in shock. From the situation so far, I had suspected they might understand our conversation to some extent, but I never imagined they could do something like this.

".....But how can a Trent write human characters.....?" "Right. That was about fifty years ago. When I was still a young sapling—"

"Ah, wait. That explanation is going to be long, so skip it." When I cut off the Trent's explanation, which felt like it was going to be incredibly tedious, I decided to focus on what I wanted to confirm.

"More importantly, what I want to confirm is this. The reason you all tried to eliminate us was because we tried to harvest the nuts you grew—the Foamto nuts—wasn't it?"

When I asked, the Trent used its branch to sweep away the characters it had written until then, and then wrote over them in a somewhat dejected, sloppy script.

"『Essentially, for all living things, the ultimate proposition is the prosperity of the species—』" "That's a 'yes' or 'no' question. A simple 'yes' or 'no' will do."

When I said that, the Trent froze for a moment, then, looking very disappointed, scribbled on the ground.

"『Yes, yes. Fine, it's a 'yes.' We're just wordy, aren't we? Hmph!』"

It was sulking! I put on a fake smile, wondering if a joke like that would even work on such a partner, though I didn't know for sure.

"Uhm, it's not that. We're just in a bit of a hurry. What I want to ask is why you specifically tried to eliminate us today, when there must have been others who came to harvest the nuts before."

That was the thing. The Foamto nut was an indispensable raw material for "Dream Cotton." Naturally, since Dream Cotton had been produced until now, there must have been people who successfully brought these nuts back.

I didn't understand why those people were allowed to harvest them while we were not. In response to my question, the Trent moved its branch tip again.

"『It is troublesome if too many are taken, but it is also troublesome if none are taken at all. Because there are so many of our kind around here now, we are running out of nutrients.』"

".....So it's like that....." I muttered. "But speaking of nuts, they're like your children. If they're taken, isn't it normal to be angry?"

The answer to Whitey’s question was: "『Why would we be angry?』" "......Uhh....." I scratched my head. "Is this a difference in sensibilities, or rather, a total difference in values..... or just the nature of plants?"

Being living things, they did desire the prosperity of the species, but it seemed their method was to scatter many seeds every year and have a few of them grow into the next trees.

In this case, if too many seeds fell in the same spot, they would end up competing for nutrients, and in the worst-case scenario, they would all wither.

I supposed their "sensibility" was to prevent such a situation..... though the Trent writing on the ground was the same one whose branch I had just blown off with a spell. Considering it didn't mention that at all, it probably didn't feel pain.

"......Wait. I think I understand the reason you attacked us now." Rhett, whose breathing had finally settled, spoke in a much calmer voice.

"In short, for your part, as long as the species prospers efficiently, it doesn't matter if the nuts are eaten by someone, right?"

"『That is correct,』" the Trent replied. "Then, how about this? We’ll listen to what you have to say, bring the fertilizer you like, and plant the seeds over a wider area."

"Wait! That’s—!" I looked at Rhett in exasperation. In other words, he was— "He’s suggesting Trent cultivation, or rather, reforestation."

"That sounds great! I’m in!" Whitey also leaned forward, her eyes sparkling. "Don't just join in on your own." Rhett ignored my comment and continued calmly to the Trent.

"Having more funds allows for more efficient planning. If the harvest increases, at the very least, you won't have to fight over nutrients, so it shouldn't be a bad deal for you either."

"Whatever the case, it all depends on your answer, Mr. Trent." "......That is true....."

While we were talking, the Trents made a rustling sound with their treetops and exchanged words that were incomprehensible to humans—

Before long, the Treant from earlier wrote characters on the ground with the tip of a branch:

『That will do』『Fine』『Alright!』 Lett and Whitey exchanged smiles and struck a victory pose with their voices in perfect harmony—

then, noticing me, they sharpened their gaze. "I'll say this now: it's fine as far as the nut of the Foamto tree goes, but that doesn't mean I've given you permission to sell those fake things as 'Dreaming Cotton Caps'."

If Lett said it, it sounded like the pride of a craftsman, but coming from Whitey, it was a blunt statement:

"There is no need to go out of your way to get permission from someone who lacks a global perspective like you."

The conversation flared up again. "Oh, honestly! If it's because the names are the same, you should just slap a word on the front of the name!"

Exasperated by their bickering, I threw those words at them, and the two of them looked at me simultaneously.

『That's it!!』 "Eeeek!?" I was the one who was surprised; in fact, I screamed.

『"Original. Original!" Good! It feels like it's inheriting a long-standing tradition! Original! That was the way to go!』

『"New." A word representing rebirth, a break from the past, and further flight. I didn't have that idea. It was so simple! To think such a commonplace idea would work!』

Beside the two who were excited and frolicking, I stood there with Naga and Whitey's entourage of men, all of us wearing expressions that weren't quite satisfied.

And so, one incident came to an end. Naga and I each received our promised reward money and were treated to both the "New" and "Original" versions of the "Dreaming Cotton Caps."

Everything was settled peacefully... I wondered? "Hey, Lina." "Hmm?" Naga questioned me as we walked down the street of the town of Augree, where the signs for "New Dreaming Cotton Caps" were becoming prominent.

"By the way—" "Just as a test, I tried the New Dreaming Cotton Caps too, and as expected, they weren't as good as the Original, but they were actually quite delicious for the price."

“Is it really okay? The Trent plantation and all that?" "Who knows." Even if she asked me, I could only tilt my head.

If the surrounding mountains became full of Trents, there was no telling what would happen, especially since the ecology of Trents itself wasn't well understood.

Something strange might have a bad influence on the area, or if the Trents knock down any passing villains, the public safety might actually improve. If I were to say I wasn't uneasy, I'd be lying, but... in any case, there was nothing to do but let things take their course.

Thinking that I might come back someday to check on the Trents and eat the "Original" ones again, I left the town behind—

(Those Who Lurk Between the Trees: Finished)

Extermination! The Mysterious Parasitic Organism!

~This time it’s a mess~

I heard a sound from the left. "Uwaaaaaaaaagh!" Parting the leaves of the grass and trees, a man dressed as a mage flew out from the thicket on the left side of the road.

—Déjà vu. On the highway, it wasn't particularly rare to see someone running away from being chased by something, but recently, I had been encountering this exact same scene.

The mage who jumped out of the thicket dashed across the road in front of me and plunged into the thicket on the right.

Chasing after him, five or six goblins came running— "Explosion Array (Mega Brand)!" *Godo-baaaaaan!* Even my spell, which blew the goblins away, was the same.

After a brief silence, the thicket on the right shook slightly, and a man stuck his face out. The man who had fled into the thicket earlier.

He wore a black robe and a black cloak—a very ordinary mage style. He was a blond middle-aged man over thirty. The man looked around restlessly, confirmed that the goblins chasing him had been defeated, and then turned his eyes toward me.

"Was that... an attack spell...? Did you do that?" "Well, yeah," I answered nonchalantly.

When I felt a presence, I had suspected it might be bandits or something similar, so I had chanted a spell just in case—this was becoming more and more similar to something that happened a while ago.

".....I see....." The man stepped out of the thicket, looked at me, and opened his mouth—but before he could continue, another shadow appeared! I turned my eyes toward it—

"—You are—!" I raised my voice slightly. Black hair and a somewhat plump build; she looked like a very, very ordinary housewife you might find anywhere in this town.

But I clearly remembered that face. A little while ago. I had ended up going along with a strange custom in the town of Filai, and she was one of the "Seven Strongest Housewives" I had met back then.

She was an ordinary person whose name I didn't even know. However, the opponent, who should have known my face, looked at me without changing her expression at all and immediately shifted her gaze to the man.

"Don't interfere. Woman." —Did she think she could get away? I thought. Since she had gone out of her way to show her face to me, whom she knew well, I wasn't about to let it slide.

"How annoying. Explosion Array (Mega Brand)!" *Ba-do-bu-baaaaaaan!* While she was rambling on, I fired another attack spell. Without even giving her time to scream for her goblins.

the man spoke up "Something a little troubling is happening right now. I've been looking for someone powerful—and that's how I happened to meet you."

"Of course, I'll reward you for helping me, but how about it? Won't you lend me your strength for a bit? If you do, the reward will be even greater, hey..."

"I'll tell you this first—" I held up one finger with a *snap!* "If you're going to borrow the power of me, Lina Inverse, a small reward won't be enough."

"Lina Inverse!? Whoa! You're *that* person!?" I saw the man recoil as if he had stepped back in surprise after hearing my name, then he stared at me and said, "I see. If you're a talent of that caliber, I have no complaints. I shall prepare a sufficient amount for the dawn of our success."

"—Wait," I said. "I haven't said I'd accept yet. In the first place, I haven't even had an explanation of what's going on."

"Is that so? Well then." "In a place a little distance from here, there's a town called Filai—" I knew it; it was about that place.

"In that place, there was a slightly strange custom. Before a man and woman marry—" "Ah, I know that one. Since I have acquaintances in town." It was the kind of thing where a man went on a journey for the sake of a woman to retrieve a certain item, and during the trip, interference or help from others was permitted.

"Um. Then this will be quick." I accepted a request for aid from a friend living in Filai, and after much deliberation, I decided to develop a lifeform that could be parasitized into humans to enhance the host's physical capabilities! "

".....Huh?" I knit my brows, but he continued without concern. "I compiled ten thousand scrolls, repeating countless researches, experiments, failures, and advancements!

Over ten long years of hardship! Finally, the other day! I reached the completion of the prototype! A parasite for humans to surpass humanity, and its name is Gestis!

But! As I rushed to my friend's side in joy, I found that he had already been married for a long time and even had quite large children! "

".....Well... that's how it goes, doesn't it....." Research and development wasn't something where, even if a certain foundation was established, it would just be completed in a short period of time.
or rather,Usually, that's how it is.

"No! In friendship between men, what matters is the spirit! I was wondering if I'd make it in time or not, but it's not a major problem!" "Is... is that so...?" "Even though! My friend—no, the man I believed to be my friend, got married without waiting for the research to be finished, and he even has children now!"

"Neglected, out of pure frustration, I threw away about twenty prototypes of 'Gestis' that I had brought with me to the outskirts of town! "And it seems those things have gone on a rampage!"

"Don't just throw them awa-a-a-a-ay!" I couldn't help but scream. However, the man glared back at me, unwilling to lose. "But I was frustrated!" "That's no excuse! Why twenty of them!?"

"Because! I was so eager that I prepared too many materials and made way too many in one go!" "like a side dish for dinner!?"

".....Anyway, regardless! Originally, the 'Gestis', which was supposed to increase physical ability and move according to the wearer's will. It turned out they could actually control people in reverse! I heard from that friend that several people in town had started acting strange.

At first, I thought about trying to go and fix it myself, but it had already spread to various people, and it was impossible! Instead, I ended up being chased around!

If such a disaster came to light, I would surely be scolded by the high-ranking members of the Mage Association!

That is why I need help! I wanted to do something about it before it turned into a mess!" the man, Ricardo, said.

Going to the town of Filai felt a bit discouraging, but I had some degree of connection there, and if I refused here, this old guy seemed like the type who would definitely try to play the victim and feign ignorance.

I felt like that would be bad. While scratching my head, I replied, "——Well, fine. If it's something like that, I'll give you a hand. But, if things go well, that includes hush money, so I expect a generous reward." "O-oh, I understand." He nodded, perhaps feeling a bit uneasy at the "hush money" part, but his face looked somewhat relieved nonetheless.

He nodded. "Alright. With this, the contract is established. Now, for the time being, where's the 'mistress' we just knocked down——" ———I was going to keep talking, but my words cut off and vanished as I turned around.

The "Lassoing mistress, the goblin user I had surely blown away with attack magic just a moment ago, was nowhere to be seen. "———Wh-where…? Since when.....!" While Ricardo and I were talking, she had recovered from the damage and fled; that was the only possibility...

but I hadn't sensed any presence at all. Come to think of it, even when she had jumped out following the goblin, I hadn't felt her presence.

"Be careful," Ricardo said to me as I stood there stunned. "Unlike my original vision, it's Gestis that is controlling the person. In other words, as long as Gestis itself hasn't taken a painful blow, the person being possessed will move about without feeling any pain, even if they take some damage."

"......I see....." The reason I hadn't sensed anything was that the one moving was the parasite called Gestis.Was that why?

"So, what does this Gestis look like, and where does it parasitize a person?" In response to my question, he held out his right palm and said,

"It's about a little smaller than the palm of your hand. It's a thick, leaf-like shape and gray in color. Normally, it should attach itself to the back of a person's head and move according to the wearer's will, but....."

Ricardo paused there. "What bothers me is that I didn't see anything like that on the head of the person who was chasing me earlier."

Perhaps it was hidden in the hair, but either way, it seemed various things were different from what I had initially imagined. "......boo hoo....." "Well, I guess we just have to go to Filai and see," I muttered, looking toward the distant sky——.

The town of Filai was an ordinary town located in a mountain valley. It wasn't my first time visiting, but my impression of it upon seeing it was nothing more or less than that. However, there were surely several people who knew my face.

That was the situation. ——Whether that would turn out to be a blessing or a curse, I didn't know yet.

"Then, first... what should we do?" "Let's enter the town of Filai immediately." Ricardo asked me while looking around nervously.

He seemed more suspicious than the people controlled by Gestis.

"First, let's try to hear the story from your friend. Specifically, who started acting strange and how——" I was interrupted. *Hyun!* The sound of the wind tearing! I instantly lowered my body, and something passed over my head!

Goshu. "Gwaah." At the same time, I heard the sound of something collapsing and Ricardo's groan. When I quickly jumped back and cast my eyes toward them——

Ricardo was reeling from a blow of a summer radish to the face, and further down the street, there was an old lady from the greengrocer's in a throwing stance!

That strike just now had clearly been aimed at me.

"———Kiyaaaah!" The greengrocer lady took another radish and a watermelon in her hands as soon as she saw she had missed———she hesitated for a split second, then grabbed the watermelon instead and threw it at me! But that hesitation was fatal!

While chanting a spell in my mind, I kicked off the ground and moved toward her! The flying watermelon hit my cloak and I closed the distance!

"Damn it!" Realizing her mistake in weapon choice, the lady reached for a radish this time———but it was too late!

I closed the gap, and my extended hand touched the lady's back! "Mono Volt (Lightning Strike)!" *Bwaaaai!* With the lightning strike I released, the lady's body gave a violent "kaboom!" shudder and then she collapsed to the ground!

It was a weak lightning spell. It wasn't powerful enough to kill a person, and if Gestis was parasitizing her, they should both be numbed and unable to move.

——Or so I thought as I looked at the back of the collapsed lady's head, but the form Ricardo had described was not there

Then why on earth——— "Hey! What are you doing all of a sudden!" I called out to the collapsed lady.

My voice should have reached her, but she was probably still numbed and her tongue wouldn't move yet.

"Suddenly hitting someone with a radish——" I was about to say. *Gobo!* "Dame Wind (Magic Wind)!" I released a spell to create a strong wind!

"Ugh.....!?" While jumping back instinctively, I chanted the spell quickly in my mouth and blew away the wind.

The one who had let out that groan was the older woman from the flower shop, located several houses upwind from the greengrocer!

For a split second, just as I was about to question the greengrocer lady, I had caught a strange scent in the wind and jumped back instantly, blowing it away with the wind spell.

Among many things, I frequently had the chance to handle magic potions and their raw materials. That scent was identical to the smell of a plant called Bellarasio, which secretes a paralyzing juice, and it had been mixed in the wind.

The older lady in the apron at the front of the flower shop, still holding a bouquet of roses, directed a sharp gaze at me. "My..... you noticed well."

"Don't underestimate me. What on earth do you intend to do by doing this?" Depending on the answer, I might have to use slightly rougher methods on this side too.

The shop lady didn't answer. While her eyes met mine and sparks flew, she slowly brought the bouquet of roses in her hand up to her face—— But at that moment.

"Stop it alreadyyyyyy!" With a shout, a man jumped out from the back of the flower shop and clung to the lady! "———Wait.....!? Mike!" "Please stop, Liza! What’s Making you do this... I can't stand to see you go through such a terrible thing either! Neither of us can take it anymore!"

".....So it's like that. This kind of thing should be stopped." When I turned my eyes toward the new voice, an old man had come out from the back of the greengrocer's and was standing beside the collapsed lady;

he said to Ricardo and me, "I'm truly sorry. Actually, we——"

".....Heh. Do you intend to betray us?" At the voice that interrupted, the greengrocer old man and the flower shop lady all gave a tremble.

When I turned my eyes toward the voice, there stood a woman in the middle of the street, though I hadn't noticed when she appeared, wearing a thick black sweater and having red hair!

———This was another face I knew. She was one of Filai's Strongest Seven Ladies I had met in a previous job.

A master of a technique where she manipulated multiple small lassos. She should have known my face from before, but——

"Who said anything about betrayal or anything else!" The greengrocer old man said toward the Lassoing Mistress in a faint, trembling voice.

"We've been indebted to Mr. Kranz for a long time, and we have a relationship! But, think about it, without any explanation you said ‘Go defeat these people and bring them here' or else.....!

My wife tried to do it, but no matter how much prize money is offered, this is still against the path of humanity!"

".....Well, fine. I didn't have high expectations to begin with——" The Lassoing Mistress flashed a small smile——

"Mega Brand (Explosive Array)!" *Zugaaaahn!* I had been chanting the spell while they were rambling on!

The spell I released took them by surprise. It blew up the ground beneath their feet. sending the Lassoing Mistress flying high into the air! ———No wait!

The Mistress, who appeared to have been blown away, suddenly came to a dead halt in the empty air! ".....So that's how it is....." I bit my lip inwardly.

The Mistress had previously hooked one of her lassos onto the roof of a nearby building, and by pulling it, she had escaped the direct hit from the strike.

If she was the previously encountered Lassoing Mistress, she wouldn't have been able to react in time even with such a setup, and would have been blown away. But the fact that she could pull off such a stunt meant——— There was only one possible answer.

Her reaction speed had increased. ———"I've heard about your methods from Gestis." From high above, the Lassoing Mistress looked down at me and spoke.

She had probably heard it from the Gestis, who was parasitizing the goblin Mistress.

"If you are to be an enemy to us, it is simply a matter of elimination." As soon as her words ended, a black torrent gushed forth!

A massive swarm of lassoes, like a waterfall, burst from both sleeves of that woman’s clothes and surged toward us with impossible volume and length!

Even for me, dodging this mass was hard! But at that moment, the air around us turned white with smoke!

"Whoa!?" Almost everyone cried out in surprise! The world turned completely white, and I could no longer see even my own hands and feet! Before I could understand what was happening, a presence appeared along with a voice I recognized.

They took my arm, and gave it a sharp pull. "......This way....." I didn't quite understand, but—fine!

I didn't resist the force and ran in that direction. While my vision was near zero, the power leading me guided me forward without hesitation, and eventually, my field of view opened up.

"It seems we've managed to give them the slip." The one who spoke was the girl pulling Ricardo's arm, a girl with a face I didn't know.

She looked to be about the same age and height as me. She was blonde and somewhat slender, but... she looked familiar. She was a young lady with black hair and large eyes, pulling my arm.

One of the Seven Strongest Mistresses of Filai... if I recalled, her name was Ai, or something like that. I felt like she had been called that before.

She had put simmered pork jello in her opponent's shoes and defeated me. Had she saved us...? If so, it would mean she wasn't parasitized by Gestis.

"Lina Inverse, I never expected you to get involved. What a strange turn of fate." The blonde girl turned to me and gave a bold smile. "Knowing me... means that perhaps you are one of the Seven Mistresses too!?" I swallowed the part about "with that look!?" and asked.

Of the Seven Ladies, there were about three whose faces I hadn't seen yet. I thought the blonde girl was one of them, but—when the blonde girl frowned unhappily, she said, "Hey, hey. Have you really forgotten about me? It's quite a cold-hearted thing to say after all this time."

Her tone had a familiar ring to it... I looked at the blonde girl in confusion, and Ai also looked at the blonde girl, seeming puzzled.

"......Mu-de-san..... that's impossible..... her makeup is different from before....."

"Uhm. Now that you mention it, was she wearing such spirited makeup before?"

"—You—!" At their conversation, I finally realized the blonde girl's true identity and raised my voice. "No way, the Heavy-Makeup Madame!?"

Among the Ladies I had fought before, there was one who wore thick white powder on her body and could freely change her appearance. She was a master of transformation.

One time she had even changed her form into a rock. When I thought about it carefully, I felt like I had never actually seen her real face in the end. If so, the white fog that covered the area earlier and blocked our vision could be explained if it was the lightly scented white powder she had scattered.

She showed a bold smile and said, "Calling it 'heavy makeup' is rude. I have the fine name of Lilliam Mu-de.

Though it's true this face, too, is not my bare face, even if it is light makeup." Then, returning to a serious expression, she continued,

"By the way—in this town, for a while now, the behavior of acquaintances and the town's influential people has been strange. Do you happen to know something? Earlier, you were saying something about Gestis."

I told her everything. About the Gestis, about Ricardo, and how I had finished hearing the whole story. "I see. So that's how it was."

While Mu-de held Ricardo in a headlock, she said, "So Aisha, too, that explains why she's off stuffing simmered pork jello into Ricardo's shoes, the number of people who have gone strange hasn't increased beyond a certain point, has it....."

At the words of those two, Ricardo also said, "Uhm. Gestis doesn't have a self-propagation function. No, it's more accurate to say it shouldn't. Well, I have to admit there was some madness in the design at the point where it's running wild.

Anyway, it's seriously painful and slimy and feels like it's going to cave in, so I'd like you to give me a break soon."

When I comforted Rekard like that, Mu-de and the others said, "Come to think of it, according to the people earlier, it seems like an order is out all over town to beat me and Ricardo and bring us to a person named Krantz—"

"Is that Krantz person also parasitized by Gestis, or what kind of person is he?" When I asked, Mu-de said with a troubled face, "A prominent figure in town, I suppose. Not in a particularly good or bad way. However, I don't know if that creature is parasitizing him. I only, know that Mr. Krantz is an extreme henpecked husband. And his wife is none other than one of our Seven Strongest Ladies, Marisa Krantz."

"I see... so there's a possibility that she's parasitized and is controlling her husband." "That's how it is. But what bothers me is—"

"That creature is supposed to attach to the back of the opponent's head. But I've never seen such a thing attached to anyone's head." Ai also nodded. "...Me either..." "You say that, but what about the situation over here?" Rekard, still held in a headlock, spoke to me.

"I'm sorry, I feel like my head is about to be crushed, so I'd like you to forgive me, but it's probably hidden in the hair.

" ".....It would be in the way during a shampoo....." I agreed with Aisha's thought.

"Anyway, it seems fastest to go to that Krantz person. If you like, I can guide you?"

"Guide me? Don't joke." At my words, Mu-de spoke unhappily. "This is a place where we fight together. Once I know my comrades are parasitized by strange creatures, I can't just leave the rest to others and overlook it."

".....I..... will fight too....."

Seeing the unwavering determination in the eyes of the two staring at me, I said, "—I understand—" I gave a large nod to the two of them.

"With everyone's power, we'll release this town from the curse of the Gestis!" Now.

Everyone except Ricardo, whose legs had been made slimy by the simmered pork jello and who was limp while still in a headlock, had their hearts unite as one.

The house of the man named Krantz was located away from the center of town. A wide site was surrounded by high walls, and in front of the iron gate were two tough-looking gatekeepers.

Mu-de, disguised to look exactly like the Lasso Mistress, walked toward those gatekeepers while dragging Ricardo and me along.

"I've brought the two I was ordered to." Of course, Ricardo and I weren't actually tied up; we just had ropes wound around our bodies to make it look like we were. .....Even so..... I had seen Mu-de apply makeup for the first time, but seeing it in person, I had no idea what kind of technique she was using.

She held various makeup tools and wigs between the fingers of both hands, and when the white powder she poured over her own head—which had been

scattering—gathered in one spot, Mu-de was already standing there in the form of the Lasso Mistress.

According to her, "If you get used to it and grab just a little talent, anyone can do it." Even so, it was impossible.

"What about the other one?" One of the gatekeepers pointed at Aisha, who was accompanying us.

Mu-de said nonchalantly, "......I had her help me capture them. I want a reward for that." "I've heard the story. Enter from the service entrance on the right, not the front door.

"The gatekeeper spoke curtly and opened the gate. We walked for a while on the stone pavement. Behind us, the heavy sound of the gate closing echoed.

And then. "......As I thought, you came." The voice that rang out belonged to the Lasso Mistress. Not the fake one, of course—the real one.

From behind the garden trees, from the shadows, more than ten men and two women appeared and surrounded us.

There were two women. Among the Seven Strongest Ladies, they were the Lasso Mistress and the Goblin Mistress. The Lasso Mistress directed a thin smile toward us and said, "I'll praise the speed of your movement... but in this situation, it was easy to guess where you were going… seeing as how you weren't showing sign of running away."

"Wind Wave Rock Pressure!" The blow I had chanted in advance burst the air, creating a gale that blew away the leaves of the garden trees and sent the two Mistresses, who were possessed by Gestis, flying along with the men who were there!

Of course, there was no damage to the men who weren't there—I shook off the ropes I was wearing and turned around. I glared at the men who were safe.

I began to chant the next spell in my mouth! Should I run, or should I fight? To the men who showed a moment's hesitation—my spell was completed! "Ice Arrow!" Dozens of arrows of cold air I released pierced forward!

The two Mistresses were frozen solid without even being able to scream! Logicly, I wasn't going to be able to do anything about the Gestis that were attached to them.

I'd melt them and deal with that properly later. They'd have them bear with it for now. They might catch a cold, though.

"You bitch!" Seeing that I had turned my back as a good opportunity, several of the remaining men kicked off the ground and charged toward me! But at that moment! Aisha moved!

I threaded through the men with quick movements— "I... I'm proud of my good eyesight..." Aisha murmured the moment she stopped. The men let out screams and collapsed. Aisha didn't even glance back at them.

"The opponent's line of sight... the movement of their muscles... if you see through it all and move, it's easy to put nikogori into their shoes as you pass by..."
Basically to her it was some kind of performance art!

"You! What a waste of incredible technique! It doesn't have what you'd call attack power, but... Gwaaaaaargh! My shoes! Inside my shoes, it's all squishy!"
"It's no use... I feel like I'm going to die..."
"My socks... the socks my daughter gave me for her birthday..." The men who received the nikogori attack were all either lying face down and groaning or muttering incoherently.

In any case, none of them could hope to return to the front lines. "...I feel like they're coming up with some kind of story to tell others... about how they were attacked..."

Whether they realized they had no chance of victory if they continued to fight, or they just hated the squishiness in their shoes, the remaining group turned on their heels and fled.

At the end of my gaze was a white mansion. It was likely that the place had already turned into a stronghold for the Gestis— "Now. Then, where shall we attack from? Lina Inverse." Mu-de asked, having returned to her blonde, girl-like form.

"The gatekeeper said to'enter through the service entrance on the right.'" Of course, it might have been a meaningless statement, but he might have been thinking about what would happen if the first line was breached. "If that's the case, where is the opponent waiting? At the entrance? The service entrance? How should we attack?"

Naturally, my answer was already decided. I turned left away from the entrance, and when I placed my hand on a suitable wall, I unleashed the spell I had been chanting until I got here. "Black Magic Wave (Blast Wave)!" With a roar, the wall I was touching crumbled!

"Invade from here!" With that declaration, I stepped through the large hole I had opened in the wall. Was it a room for guests? Although it was well-kept, it looked like a small guest room that wasn't used much, with a bed and a small writing desk.

"There they are!" "It's the west guest room!" Voices came from the right side of the hallway as someone spotted me. Footsteps approached from right to left in response— I activated the spell I had been chanting.

I tossed out a ball of light I had created, and said "Fireball" and quickly pulled back, slamming the door shut. *Thud*. Along with an explosion, the door shook.

When I opened it to peek out, there were men collapsed here and there. They weren't direct hits, but they seemed scorched by the flames that blew through the hallway. I didn't think their lives were in danger, though.

I jumped out and headed toward the entrance.

"Hey! Don't flinch! Go!" Coming from my destination was the voice of a man shouting at someone. However, seeing my single strike, most of the group wasn't so brave. They were likely shouting in their hearts for the one giving the orders to go instead.

Before long, we reached the entrance hall— "Burst Rondo!" *Chupopopopopopopopopo!* "W-w-w-w-w-w-what the—!?"

What I released was a spell that scattered many small fireballs with almost no lethal force. It only had enough power to singe hair, but the flashy visual intimidation worked well on the panicked opponents! Many of the people who happened to be there let out screams and scattered in disorder!

When I raised my eyes toward the angry voices that were close to screams, I saw three figures standing on the second-floor terrace overlooking the entrance hall. Judging by their clothing, the two on the left and right were guards, and the one in the middle was probably—

"Are you Mr. Klantz?" When I asked, the man’s face contorted. "I don't know if you're being manipulated by something or if you're just listening to what your wife says, but if you're only listening to what your wife says, you'd better lend us a hand while you still can."

"Heh..." "We're going to bring your wife back to her senses soon. When that happens, I think it would be better if you cooperated with us now so as not to cause trouble, right?" "Heh... heh..."

To my persuasion, Klantz greatly distorted his expression, "Heh... fuhahahaha! Don't make me laugh! Bring her back, you say!?" He let out a mad-like laugh and said, "It's as if you think she was a decent human being to begin with!"

"......Whoa..." "Indeed! My wife, Marisa, became possessed by something calling itself Gestis, and her personality had changed greatly! But! It was only after that happened! I finally learned what it was like to be happy spending time with a companion! To return her to how she was... I won't allow it! Never!" He shouted, his eyes bloodshot.

...I knew there were people who struggled with marriage regardless of gender, but... this person's desperation suggested he had been through a lot with his wife... Even so, we couldn't just back down, even if it was for his happiness. If Gestis were to possess someone even more important—for example, royalty or nobility—there was no telling what might happen.

It seemed Klantz himself wasn't possessed, but it was a fact that he had tried to hunt me and Ricardo, whether of his own will or at Gestis's request. Then there was no room for sympathy. "......It seems that talks have broken down..."

"Naturally! Though, I suppose you intended to use force from the start! How foolish to even try to talk!"

"Go! You lot!" At the command, the two men waiting at Klantz's sides leaped over the terrace railing and landed at the same time they ran toward us! They’re Fast! Is that Gestis's possession!? My spell wouldn't strike in time.

"You’re too naive!" Mu-de roared, the air turned white! A scentless white smoke screen! No matter how much the physical ability of a human possessed by Gestis increased, their five senses, such as vision, were those of a human.

My spell was completed in the white mist "What are you doing!"

Little by little, in the thinning white smog, Klantz's voice echoed. "They've escaped! They're in the back!" In response, the two guards turned on their heels, broke through the whiteness, and ran toward the hallway leading to the back of the mansion from the hall. However, we weren't there.

I chased after the men's backs, and as I ran out from the whiteness, I released the spell I had chanted! "Freeze Arrow!" *Kishikishikishiiiii!* Two men were turned into ice statues by the baptism of cold arrows!

"Wha...!? Ridiculous… what was that just now...?" Did he realize that the voice that had echoed was my own? From above the terrace, Klantz let out a voice of consternation. "Did you hear my voice?" Klantz's inquiry, in the voice of Mu-de, was heard from within the spreading white.

The white mist gathered at a single point— "Did you think that all I could change was my appearance?" In the middle of the line, the voice changed from Klantz's to a woman's. Specifically, Mu-de's. Mu-de, standing there with a fearless smile and a defiant gaze, said, "Voice and words are also part of fashion. Did you think that I, being so fastidious about makeup, wouldn't be particular about my voice?"

"D-damn it!" Klantz turned on his heel and disappeared into the back. Of course, I had no intention of letting him escape! We ran up the stairs at the end of the hall! We chased Klantz and tried to rush into the passage leading to the back where he stopped.

Standing in the way at the end of the passage were three women in white dresses. They stood there nonchalantly, but the aura they wore was a fierce, demonic one. "—Be careful—" Mu-de swallowed hard and said to me in a low voice.

"Three of the seven strongest wives of Filai—the one with silver hair in the middle is Marisa. Are they all possessed?" The voice held a tension that indicated the strength of the opponent. ...Or rather, Mu-de and Aishas' who's weapons were makeup and nikogori.

They weren't really suited for direct combat. I kept my eyes on the three of them, "What are each of their weapons?"
"Backbiting, complaining, and their husband's power." .....Well... for wives who valued neighborhood relationships, those might be great weapons, but they didn't seem like powers suited for direct combat.

The moment I thought that. The figures of the three wives in white suddenly grew larger! And with a dash that had almost no preliminary movement, they closed the distance to us all at once! And all three of them were aiming for me!

I hurriedly jumped back to try to keep my distance, but the opponents' speed had increased due to being possessed by Gestis!

Chanting a spell was not going to work in time! I managed to dodge the strikes coming from the front and the right, but my left arm was grabbed! This was bad!

I tried to shake them off somehow, but their strength had increased as well as their speed; the opponent's hand gripped my arm firmly and wouldn't let go—far from it, while I was distracted by my left, my right hand was caught too!

I've been caught! The silver-haired one in front, Marisa, approached me—

".....Lina, it's dangerous.....!" It was Aisha who moved instantly! In the gap while the three wives' attention was focused on me, she ran through like flowing water and filled the wives' shoes with nikogori!

I don't need that kind of incomprehensible support! I retorted in my mind, but at that moment! *Pyuiiiiiiiiii!* The three wives let out screams that a person should never make, let go of me, and struggled!

Gray leaves covered in nikogori jumped out from the shoes they had struggled out of! "Gestis!? It was hiding in a place like that?!" From behind came Ricardo's voice in astonishment. He asked me in a surprised tone, "Wasn't it supposed to be on the back of their heads!?"

"In their designs, yes! But in reality, they parasitized the soles of the feet to avoid being hurt themselves, and from there, they extended nerve fibers to manipulate the host!" Aisha shouted.

It seemed that because of the jellied meat that had entered their shoes, the nerve transmissions of everyone in the mansion had been obstructed. Ricardo pointed toward the back of the mansion with no particular meaning and said,

"It's because of your jellied meat that everyone's shoes in this mansion are a sticky mess!"

Aisha replied, ".....I understand....." In response to the request, she flashed a smile like an angel and began taking out one leather bag after another—bags that were surely packed tight—from under her long skirt. "Indeed—this is all of them," she said. After confirming the number of leaves lined up, Ricardo gave a large nod. Once I knew the weakness, the battle—no, the extermination—ended unilaterally in no time. While the athletic ability of those parasitized by the Gestis had jumped significantly, they were no match for the Aisha’s obsession. She was determined to stuff jellied meat into the shoes of every living thing.

She didn't care if they were old or young, men or women, those parasitized by Gestis or those who weren't. Cows. Pigs. Chickens. Or even fish.

From Aisha's jellied meat collection, she selected the jellied meat that best fit the opponent’s age, gender, and appearance, and stuffed it into their shoes until they were full—and just like that, the Gestis were effortlessly defeated.

All that remained were the exhausted Gestis, the jellied meat that had turned the depths of the carpet into a sticky mess, and Kranz, who was weeping uncontrollably.

".....Uuuwaaaaaaa..... The mansion is back to how it was, but the inside is a mess..... What on earth am I supposed to do....." he sobbed. I spoke to the collapsed Kranz in a casual tone. "It'll be fine." To his questioning look, I pointed at Ricardo while still wearing a smile. "Since Ricardo-san is the one who caused this, I'm sure he'll take responsibility for all sorts of things."

"Eh..... Eeeeehh!? Wait, wait, Lina-kun! Are you planning to sell me out, your client!?" Ricardo cried.
"No way," I said, waving my hands back and forth. "Since you're an adult, you have to take responsibility for what you did. But I do think a client is a client until the contract ends. So, I won't sell you out." I kept my smile and looked over at Kranz.

"If someone were to pay me the request fee on your behalf right here, then the request would end at that point. There would be no need for me to protect the person who caused such a stupid commotion."

"...I see," Kranz said. Sensing what I was trying to say, Kranz stood up with a wobble—no, with a squelch amidst the jellied-meat-covered stickiness. A twisted smile appeared on his face, though I couldn't tell if it was madness or demonic intent. "Then let me pay that request fee right now."

"Eh..... Eeeeehh!?" Ricardo looked around frantically for help, but of course, there was none.The incident ended. Once I received the request fee that Kranz paid on Ricardo's behalf, I left the place immediately, so I don't know what happened to Ricardo after that. Whether he was being forced to clean the entire mansion by himself, or if Kranz was secretly proposing a personality remodeling plan for the "wife"... either way, the only thing that was certain was that daily life had returned to the town of Filai—and that the smell of jellied meat had lingered on my clothes and shoes for a while.

(Extermination! The Mysterious Parasite!: Finished)

Afterword

Author: "Hello everyone!" And so, this was not Slayers Special 31, but Slayers Smash. Vol 1.

The reason the series title changed from "Overcoming the Trials of the Lion" onward was because...
L: "Because the afterword was too stained with the author's blood, right? ♪"
Author: "As if there's such a bloody reason for a change! It's just a change to coincide with the anime!" Even so, as the volume count increases, I often find myself thinking, "I wonder what volume will be next" while writing the afterword.
L: "......That's certainly a bit much. As an author."
Author: "Anyway, for a novel series, this many volumes might make it hard for new people to jump in."
L: "I see. So, where did the name 'Smash.' come from?"
Author: "Well... the editorial department and I threw around various titles, and it just kind of came from that."

Author: "They make the author think of titles, so weird candidates start popping up."
L: Oh—..... authors do try to give things strange titles sometimes..... So, for example, what kind did you come up with?"
Author: "Slayers Triple."
L: "Why 'Triple'?"
Author: "Wait, calm down. No need for such a serious face. In the end, it became 'Smash.' in the end." A "Triple" has a proper reason. You know, when a review is good, they call it a "hit."
L: "Using 'hit' for a good review is just standard. It's a bit of a stretch."
Author: "I wanted to go a bit beyond a hit, hoping for reviews like a 'triple strike.' That kind of feeling!
L: Then why not just go with 'Home Run'? It feels better."
Author: "Well, 'Home Run' seemed a bit too much. But if it were 'Slayers Single' or 'Slayers Sacrifice Bunt,' it feels like it wouldn't have much momentum, right? So I went with 'Triple' to keep the balance. See! It's a convincing reason!"
L: "No matter what you say, as a series title, it's pretty terrible."

Author: ".....sob sob sob..... Anyway, please look forward to 'Smash.' Oh, and one more thing. I'm also planning to announce this in the afterword of the new edition, but to coincide with the series title change, we're planning a 'Best Selection' version from the previous 'Special' volumes.
L: Well, they're currently working on a project to let readers vote on which stories to include! Instead of choosing all of them, about half of the five planned volumes will be selected by the editors and the author. You can also vote using postcards, the web, or mobile sites!
Author: Oh, right, right. Just in case. For those who picked this up a little while after it came out. This is strictly a story from 2008, so please be aware of that. For detailed voting methods, please check future issues of Dragon Magazine or the website.
L: If everyone keeps shouting 'Volume Afterword' or 'Super Giant Afterword,' maybe even a book that's just an afterword collection could happen!
Author: .....I wonder how that would work as a book.....? Anyway, whether it's the selection or this Slayers Smash., I hope you continue to support us.
L: Well then, let's meet again in another volume like this! ♪"

Afterword: Finished.